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letters

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

I want to let you know that I thoroughly enjoy your magazine. Besides the first-rate stories, the Folkroots articles are invariably interesting and informative, and Karen Haber's artist profiles bring deserved attention to often-overlooked graphic artists.

But I gotta croak! In "Omar the Wizard," the illustration titled "Bufo" is a toad! Taxonomically speaking, Bufo:toad and Rana:frog. Look at "Bufo." He's a warty, dry-skinned, terrestrial-dwelling fellow. Frogs, on the other hand, are smooth-skinned, web-footed, long-bodied, and primarily aquatic.

But pardon my herpetological harping. Keep up your good work, and I look forward to the next issue.

Karen Porter
Mays Landing, New Jersey

Wow. So I actually have a toad in my pond, and not a frog? Eww ...

Ms. McCarthy:

It would be wonderful if *Realms of Fantasy* held an annual writing contest to encourage outstanding prose! Have the publishers ever considered any such thing? Plus, I think it would be great if a column existed that outlined the adventures (or misadventures) of the wonderful characters immortalized through the fabulous artwork depicted on each issue's cover.

As much as I love reading every article in your publication, I also love the artwork! It would be absolutely wonderful if a short piece of fiction existed to further illustrate such talent!

Ryan Stout
Salt Lake City, Utah

Thanks, Ryan, but every issue is exactly such a contest. Writers send me their work, I read it, and the top five or six get published and receive a nice "cash prize"!

Ms. McCarthy:

I have never written a letter to a magazine before, yet having just read the letters page of the June issue of *Realms*, I feel compelled.

I have been writing since my late teens (I am now 26), but never very seriously or with much effort. Early on I believed publishing was a magical process; indeed, it is, but a lot of elbow grease and sweat is needed.

Recently, I began pursuing my writing career in a much more serious fashion. I have submitted to many of the genre magazines by the usual snail mail route. I have also submitted stories to e-zines, many of which will accept submissions by e-mail. Every magazine—whether print or electronic—has its own guidelines, and I try to follow these as closely as possible. I feel this is a common courtesy. You have to take time to become aware of the lay of the land, as it were. Publication does not happen, by and large, overnight.

Best-selling authors aren't a very common animal. All of them are very dedicated and hardworking, including Dean R. Koontz, of course. That seems to be the key. A book or two a year means you *have* to be working every day.

I have heard many other authors say: *Write* every day. Read everything and anything. Pay attention at all times and take notes. Know your markets and submit according to the rules set out by the publication's editor. Keep sending the story out until you have exhausted every market (and even beyond). Keep writing and studying.

This has become a very long-winded letter, and I apologize. I am very much concerned with the current state of the field. I regret that there are so few magazines devoted to fantasy, and am amazed that *Realms* exists. A glossy full-color fantasy magazine? Simply wonderful. The avenues for novel-length fantasy seem very good at the present time, but I wish there were more avenues for authors of fantasy short fiction. I am picking up every genre magazine I can find to be more aware of the state of the markets for it.

I know that I will eventually get my break. I know this because I simply refuse to give up.

In any case, I would like to congratulate you on your excellent and beautiful magazine. I would also like to give a special tip of the hat to the artist Todd Lockwood. At first I thought your cover was done by Brom, but the style was a bit cleaner, sharper. I very much admire Brom and I feel Lockwood has incorporated his influences well. I will be seeking out much more of his work.

Joseph Morgan Ives

Thanks for a well-reasoned and very nice letter. Your level-headed attitude will serve you well, and I wish you success!

Your letters are welcome.
Send them to: Letters to the Editor,
Realms of Fantasy, *P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, e-mail to: realmsoffantasy@aol. com*

REALMS OF FANTASY
VOLUME 9 NUMBER 2

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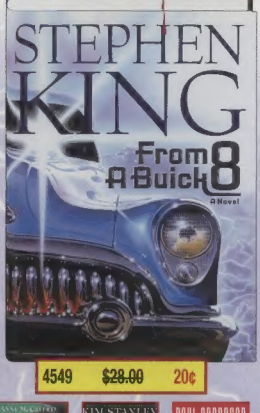

Stephen King's latest thriller tells a secret the Pennsylvania State Police kept in Shed B for 20 years—a vintage car that still draws people in for a deadly look. When a young man can't resist, the veteran troopers reveal the otherworldly nature of this machine. But was Stephen King hinting at an adventure he was almost part of himself? (And will this be his last-ever novel?)

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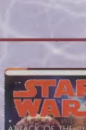

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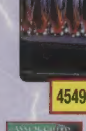

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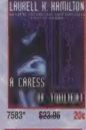

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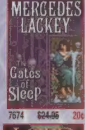

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By Rosa Nelson

The fantasy miniseries had a rebirth during the 1990s that continues today.

In 1996 NBC aired *Gulliver's Travels* during February sweeps in an attempt to garner big ratings. Tapping into the phenomenal changes in technology, *Gulliver's Travels* set out to prove special effects could make fantasy look real.

It worked.

Gulliver's Travels won a handful of Emmy awards. Every network was eager to jump on the bandwagon. In only six years, 10 fantasy miniseries aired on television. Many were based on classic stories, while others were original and new fantasies.

In a parallel world where fairy tales are history, New York is the 10th Kingdom.

Most depend on effects provided by The Jim Henson Company. President Brian Henson thought his miniseries, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, was likely to be the last of the TV fantasy miniseries. Prior to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Henson was getting feedback from within the television industry that fantasies and miniseries weren't working anymore. "Since September, that's not what I hear at all," Henson says. "Their minds are opened up and they're ready to see the American consciousness shift."

Keep your eyes open for more fantasies on TV. In the meantime, here are 10 miniseries made for television, now available on video and/or DVD.

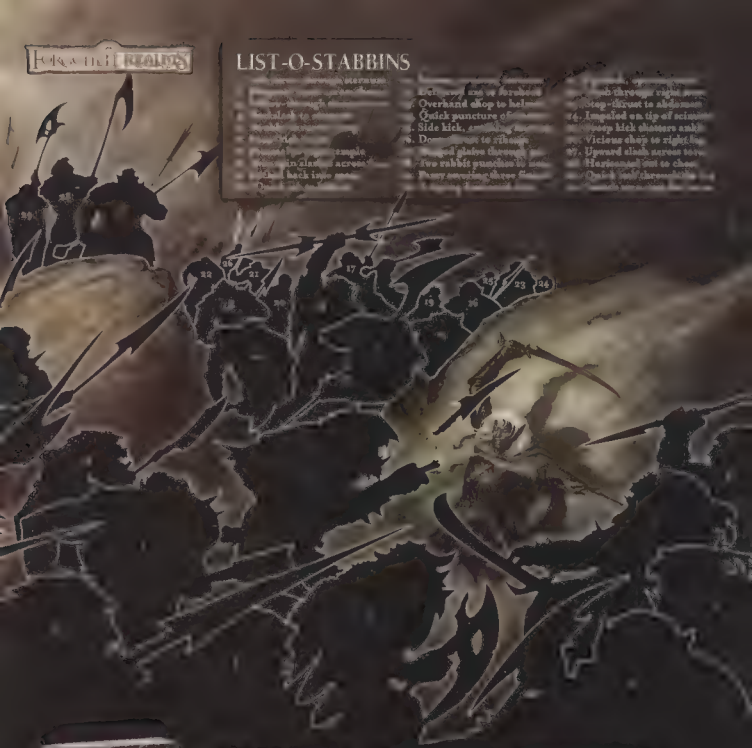
Gulliver's Travels (1996, 187 minutes), based on Jonathan Swift's novel, is a political satire told through the eyes of Dr. Gulliver (played by Ted Danson of TV's *Becker* and *Cheers*), who returns to England in an animal like state after being lost at sea for nine years. Once home, he finds his wife (played by Danson's real-life wife, Mary Steenbergen of *Life as a House* and *Pounder*) waiting for him, along with a son he has never known. Worse, Gulliver finds that his practice has been taken over by a doctor scheming to marry Gulliver's wife.

Gulliver claims he's actually journeyed to several different lands, each more fantastic than the next. One minute he talks of Lilliput, where people are no bigger than matches. Then he recounts a land of giants, where Gulliver himself was no larger than a mouse.

He's soon sent off to a mental hospital, where he continues his tales about an island floating in the air, a mansion where historical figures pass through time, and a country where animals are civilized and people are the beasts. Each society Gulliver visits has its own unique political system, which is explained to Gulliver, though he often debates as a proper Englishman. The stories are wickedly sharp criticisms of government and society.

The real-time events in Gulliver's life parallel his fantastic tales of foreign lands. Scenes weave present and past together seamlessly, reflecting Gulliver's precarious state of mind.

The Odyssey (1997, 164 minutes) is based on Homer's epic poem and was filmed on location in Turkey, Malta, and Gozo. The story begins in Ithaca, Greece, where Queen Penelope (played by Greta Scacchi of *The Player* and TV's *Rasputin*) goes into labor and delivers a son, with husband Odysseus (played by Armand Assante of *The Mambo Kings* and *The Road to El Dorado*) by her side. A fleet of



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ships arrives with bad news: Greece is at war with Troy. Odysseus knows he must leave at once to fight. He's well aware it might mean he'll never see his wife or child again.

Odysseus prays to the goddess Athena (played by Isabella Rossellini of TV's *Merlin* and *Napoleon*). She confides that his destiny is to defeat Troy and be remembered. Odysseus doesn't care about being famous. He just wants to go home once the war is over.

But it's something that isn't meant to be. After defeating Troy by creating the infamous Trojan Horse, Odysseus toots his own horn over the victory. This riles Poseidon, god of the sea. At a critical moment, it was Poseidon's intervention that made it possible for the Trojan Horse ruse to succeed. By gloating over his own cleverness, Odysseus insults Poseidon, who expects Odysseus to be giving thanks instead. Because of this faux pas, Poseidon vows that Odysseus will never find his way back home.

So begins Odysseus's long day's journey into years. No matter how he navigates, his ship wanders to strange and distant lands where he meets monsters and gods. Meanwhile, back in Ithaca, his son is growing toward adulthood, and Penelope does her best to delay a small army of suitors who insist she choose a new husband—who will inherit Odysseus's wealth and power.

The Odyssey is an interesting treatment of the classic work, with rich visuals and the talents of Jim Henson's Creature Shop.

Gulliver (Ted Danson) has an audience with the Emperor of Lilliput (Peter O'Toole). Gulliver's Travels *was the first of the recent TV miniseries to air with great success.*

Merlin (1998, 140 minutes) tells the Arthurian legend from the wizard's point of view. The story begins as England is torn apart by civil war, followed by the invasion of the Saxons, who only make things worse. As Christianity makes inroads in England, many of its people turn to the stone circles and pray to the pagan gods for help. In response, the pagan goddess Queen Mav (played by Miranda Richardson of *Sleepy Hollow* and TV's *Alice in Wonderland*) calls upon her sister, the Lady of the Lake (also played by Richardson), an ethereal woman made of water, who wears swimming fish around her neck as a necklace. Mav decides to create Merlin (played by Sam Neill of *Jurassic Park* and *Bicentennial Man*).

As a young man, Merlin meets and falls in love with Nimue (played by Isabella Rossellini), but they're star-crossed. After Merlin saves her life, their paths touch throughout the rest of their lives, but something always crops up to keep them apart. At one point, Nimue is burned and disfigured by a dragon. Merlin takes her to Avalon, where she's looked after by nuns. He then calls upon the Lady of the Lake for help, and she gives the sword Excalibur to him. While much of the story focuses on Merlin, it eventually leads into the traditional tale of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Morgan Le Fay, and Mordred.

Merlin is told in a very stylized manner, using photography tricks to suggest magic and sorcery, as well as computer-generated special effects. Although this film's ultimate message seems to be that gods only exist as long as they're remembered, there also seems to be a hint that Christianity saved the day.

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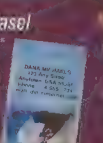

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ABOVE: Calypso (Vanessa Williams) held Odysseus on the island of Ogygia for seven years during his long voyage RIGHT: Rufus Sewell stars as Ali Baba in Arabian Nights

Alice in Wonderland (1999, 129 minutes) captures the creepiness of both the tone of Lewis Carrol's classic novel and its original illustrations, combining it with parts of *Through the Looking Glass*. This miniseries boasts an outstanding cast and earns high marks for staying fairly true to the original books.

Carrol's novel is a political satire of Victorian England. The problem is that most Americans aren't experts on that era, so many of the underlying references mean little or nothing to the average audience. The filmmakers make the story more accessible by focusing on Alice (played by Tina Majorino of *Waterworld*) whose parents ask her to sing for their guests at an outdoor tea party. The problem is that Alice has stage fright. She dreads the thought of standing up in front of a group of strangers and being the center of attention. In a fit of shyness, Alice runs away from the house, spots the White Rabbit, drops down the rabbit hole, and her adventures begin.

Ben Kingsley (*Gandhi*, *Sexy Beast*) is a marvelous Caterpillar. Martin Short (TV's *Primetime Glick* and *Merlin*) is insanely perfect as the Mad Hatter. Miranda Richardson is weird and frightening as the Queen of Hearts, and Gene Wilder (*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*) is nothing short of lovely as the Mock Turtle. The special effects are smooth and eerie. Even the songs are appropriately bizarre and mournful. All in all, this one's a winner.

The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns (1999, 171 minutes) is the weakest miniseries in terms of story, but the special effects are enjoyable, especially for anyone who's a big fan of fairies and leprechauns.

This miniseries tells two parallel stories. The main story is about Jack Woods (played by Randy Quaid of *Hard Rain* and *Independence Day*), a New York businessman sent to Ireland for reasons that he keeps secret. When Jack rents a quaint Irish cottage in the middle of nowhere, he pretends to be on vacation. He soon meets Kathleen (played by Orla Brady of TV's *Family Law* and *Wuthering Heights*), a local Irish woman who's initially suspicious but easily won over by Jack's charm.

Early in the story, Jack saves the life of a leprechaun, and they become friends. Mickey (played by Daniel Betts of TV's *The Canterville Ghost*) is the son of Jack's leprechaun friend. Although there's no love lost between fairies and leprechauns, Mickey and his friends disguise themselves and crash a fairy ball, where he falls in love with the fairy princess.

Both stories are derivative. The story of Mickey and the fairy princess is a diluted version of Romeo and Juliet, except with a happy ending. The story of Jack and Kathleen has been used in so many movies that it's a cliché. It's unclear why any of these characters fall in love, but they do, and eventually the two love stories intertwine. It's not a bad story, but it doesn't make a lot of sense in terms of plot or characters. The humor seems more appropriate for the 1950s, because it often depends on pointing out stereotypical differences between men and women.

Arabian Nights (2000, 139 minutes) weaves a group of magical stories together through the main story of Scheherezade, based on the classic tales of 1001 Arabian Nights.

The story begins with the nightmare of a sultan, Schariar (played by Dougray Scott of *Ever After* and *Mission: Impossible II*). When his wife tried to kill him, Schariar kills her and learns she had conspired against him with his own brother. For 40 nights, Schariar's been haunted by nightmares and he's reached the point of being driven mad.

However, he's faced with a dilemma. In order to hold onto his kingdom and prevent his brother from taking over, Schariar must marry again. Nearly being killed by his now dead wife makes it impossible for him to trust another woman. Although Schariar knows he must marry again, he's willing to do so only if he plans her death to ensure his own life.

Word spreads through the sultan's harem, and all of the women are terrified. Scheherezade is the daughter of Schariar's right-hand man, and she knew and loved Schariar when they were children. She volunteers to marry him.

Scheherezade's father claims that power has eaten Schariar's soul. Scheherezade believes that she can save Schariar from himself.

What Scheherezade has going for her is her love of storytelling. She studies from the local storyteller, asking his advice on how to keep an audience's attention. Scheherezade's plan is to tell stories to Schariar and keep him constantly interested so he won't want to kill her.

And so Scheherezade tells her stories and ends each one with a cliffhanger, which guarantees her life from night to night. Ultimately, *Arabian Nights* is a story of true love that marries the imagery of all the stories together in an exquisitely satisfying way.

The 10th Kingdom (2000, 417 minutes) begins with Virginia (played by Kimberly Williams of *Father of the Bride* and TV's *According to Jim*), a New York waitress who wants nothing more than a husband and her own restaurant. She lives with her father (played by John Larroquette of *JFK* and TV's

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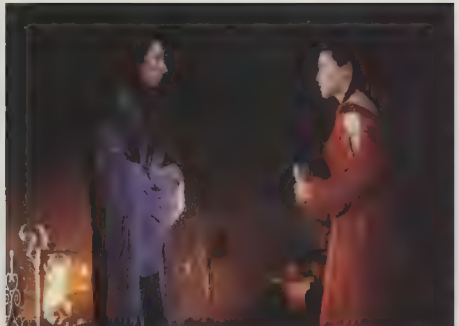

Viviane, the Lady of the Lake (Anjelica Huston)—with the help of Merlin—controls the destiny of Morgaine (Juliana Margulies) in The Mists of Avalon. *Based on the popular novel by Marion Zimmer Bradley, the miniseries portrays Arthurian legend through the eyes of the women.*

Night Court), a janitor in the building where they live.

But while Virginia and her father quietly live their lives, another world exists in another dimension. It's a world where all the fairy tales we know are history. It's a world of nine kingdoms—New York becomes known as the 10th kingdom. In the 4th kingdom, a troll sets an evil stepmother free from the Snow White Memorial Prison. In an attempt to regain power, the evil stepmother places a spell on Prince Wendell (played by Daniel Lapaine of *Brokedown Palace*)—he takes on the body of her dog, and the dog takes on the body of the prince. She then frees another prisoner Wolf (played by Scott Cohen of TV's *NYPD Blue* and *Gilmore Girls*), a wolf who looks like a man, as her accomplice.

The prince (in the body of the dog) escapes through a magic mirror into New York, where his fate meets Virginia's. She and her father soon find themselves in the fairy-tale world, where they are pursued by Wolf and trolls as the evil stepmother strives to capture the prince before anyone can find out who he really is.

The 10th Kingdom is the longest and possibly the most ambitious of these miniseries. Although the humor leans toward being broad and silly at times, its heart is often in the right place. The story works for a handful of reasons. Things are not always as they seem—the story often rises above clichés and takes unusual and unexpected turns. Virginia has a secret. Even her father doesn't know that she doesn't remember everything about her past. It's a secret worthy of any fairy tale, and its revelation is powerful and poignant.

Jason and the Argonauts (2000, 179 minutes) is a strong, new vision of the Greek myth about Jason and the Golden Fleece.

The story begins when the palace of the King of Iolcus is invaded. Jason (played by Jason London of *Dazed and Confused*) is the son of the king and the rightful heir to the kingdom. The invader is Jason's uncle, Pelias (played by Dennis Hopper of *Blue Velvet* and *Ed TV*), who feels entitled to the throne. Pelias kills Jason's father, but not before he can spirit Jason to safety.

Jason grows up not knowing who he really is. When he's an adult, a centaur brings an amulet to him and points Jason toward the truth.

Jason travels to the palace and helps an old woman cross a river simply because she needs the help. It turns out that she's actually the goddess Hera. Impressed by Jason's kindness, she tells him about the golden fleece, said to be the greatest gift from the gods. Pelias, now known as "The Great Taxer," bleeds the kingdom dry to raise money to send explorers out to find the fleece. Pelias believes it will grant his greatest wish of immortality, so he'll spare no expense in getting it.

When Jason arrives at the palace, he's captured—a psychic foresaw his arrival and warned Pelias. Jason saves himself from execution by claiming that he can find the golden fleece and bring it back to Pelias. But there's a catch: If Jason fails to return with the golden fleece in six months, Pelias vows to kill Jason's mother, who is now married to Pelias.

Jason gathers up an unusual crew to sail on the *Argo*, the ship that Pelias gives to him. As they journey, they encounter magical places and find themselves at the whim of the gods at any given moment.

Filmed on location in Turkey, *Jason and the Argonauts* is a lush, beautiful film that drives home the point that we forge our own destiny through our actions. It blends intelligence and thoughtfulness with imagination and great special effects.

The Mists of Avalon (2001, 183 minutes) tells the story of the women who brought King Arthur to power, as well as the struggle between Christianity and Druidism in medieval times.

As a young girl, Morgaine (played by Julianna Margulies of *Dinosaur* and TV's *ER*) is the only child of Igraine and her Roman warrior husband, Gorlois. Morgaine is a source of comfort to her mother, who married to strengthen allegiances between her people and Rome. However, Igraine is a daughter of the Holy Isle, Avalon, a magic place that serves as a safe haven for Druid priestesses, and yet co-exists on the border of the same time and space of a Christian convent.

In traditional Arthurian legend, Morgaine (known as Morgan Le Fey) is painted as an evil sorceress who seduces Arthur. But here, we come to know and understand Morgaine as a woman who is struggling to live her life the best way she knows how. Her encounter with Arthur is part of a Druidic tradition, and their roles are determined by others. From that point on, the destiny of King Arthur slowly unravels.

Filmed in Prague, *The Mists of Avalon* is a lush, rich production.

Jack and the Beanstalk (2001, approximately 180 minutes) combines the modern-day story of a corporate mogul with the well-known fairy tale. A miniseries by the Jim Henson Company, this is an original work that weaves an interesting story between past and present, as well as between reality and fantasy. It offers thought-provoking ideas that are appropriate for both children and adults.

The story begins with the question: What if the fairy tale were true? Jack Robinson (played by Matthew Modine of *Full Metal Jacket* and *Memphis Belle*) is a workaholic who has inherited his corporation and wealth from his family. But there's a problem: No man in Jack's family has ever lived past the age of 40. Although Jack keeps himself in perfect physical shape, he's well aware that he's in his late 30s and could be approaching an early death. It seems as if the men in his family are cursed.

When his corporation unearths the bones of an enormous giant at an excavation site, Jack's world begins to change. He meets a mysterious woman who questions where Jack's family money comes from, raises the issue of family sin, and eventually claims that Jack is a thief and a murderer. These questions and accusations upset Jack enough for him to plunge head first into investigating his roots—he learns the truth about the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, and it's not a pretty truth.

The strength of this miniseries is the concept of there being two sides to every story. *Jack and the Beanstalk* explores what the other side of the story could have been and what it means in modern-day terms.

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By Gahan Wilson

The stories of Manly Wade Wellman will forever raise goose bumps.

It was my great good fortune to eventually meet and become a friend of Manly Wade Wellman but he had played quite a large part in my life before that and probably a good deal to do with my sprouting in directions which would eventually lead to that meeting and that friendship, via his stories and novellas in the pages of the legendary pulp magazine *Weird Tales*

There was still an amazingly large amount of really good stuff to be encountered in *Weird Tales* when I gulped it down as a kid in its latter days True enough it had lost steady input from both Howard Phillips Lovecraft and Robert E Howard since they had both been some time dead and were therefore no longer contributing (fortunately that did not stop the management of *WT* to see to it that numerous reprints and "discoveries" of their work continued to appear), but the great Clark Ashton Smith was still around to awe and astound by sending in an occasional bejeweled wonder and Ray Bradbury had chosen the publication to begin his wondrous blooming and there were fine spooky stalwarts such as Robert Bloch and Henry S. Whitehead and Seabury Quinn to assure an abundance of reliably spooky stories

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Sur Apropos of Nothing. *Peter David's wickedly funny, full-blown satire of the heroic fantasy genre, sweeps away all of the clichés*

But even with all of that going on, I clearly recall that when I got hold of a new issue the first thing I'd do was to check its table of contents and see if there was a story or a novella in there by dear old Manly Wade Wellman and if there was I'd turn right to it because I knew for certain sure it would grab and entertain me and was 100 percent guaranteed to leave me with a pleasantly creepy glow

The people at Night Shade books are seeing to it that these tales will continue to chill and delight by bringing out a series of volumes of ***The Selected Stories of Manly Wade Wellman*** *(The Third Cry to Legba and Other Invocations—Volume 1, The Devil Is Not Mocked and Other Warnings—Volume 2, Fearful Rock and Other Precarious Locales—Volume 3,* edited by John Pelan, illustrated by Kenneth Waters, Night Shade Books, San Francisco, CA, hard cover; $35 00 each) And bless their hearts for it because since the Carcosa books (*Worse Things Waiting* and *Lonely Vigils*) went out of print the only collection of short stories of his which is reasonably available is *Who Fears the Devil* which concerns the doings of his John the Balladeer and which are therefore quite sensibly not included in Night Shade's revival

Although without doubt the Balladeer stories are the ones for which this author will be mainly remembered—and justly so for they are the culmination and fulfillment of his wonderfully atmospheric and genuinely haunting tales concerning weird goings on amidst the isolated folk who dwell in the mountainous southern regions of this country—the tales I was mostly drawn to in *Weird Tales* were the adventures concerning the grimly heroic doings of the very uncountryfied psychic detective John Thunstone and I have to confess that to this day those stories are the ones that still stir in me the most ruminations and the deepest wishes and I am delighted they are made available again in the first volume in this series,

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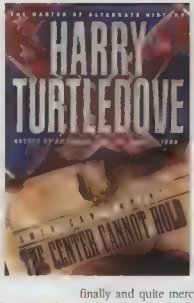
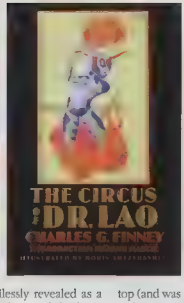
The Third Cry to Legba

Wellman enjoyed making up and expanding on the doings of stalwart trackers-down of supernatural evil—Judge Pursuivant and Lee Cobbett are the other main contenders among a crew of worthy and formidably right-eous heroes who are to be found in the pages of these Night Shade books—but the massive and mysterious Thunstone who lives quietly in a suite of a very comfortable and very ordinary hotel north of Times Square but is well connected enough to easily "secure authorization to do almost anything" is, in my opinion, the best of them all.





He is a skillful variant on the classic upscale private detective combined with a far more ancient mythic defender of innocents, the benign wizard now most popularly recognizable in the figure of Tolkien's Gandalf. As such a being he is supremely comforting and tender to those he aids and mercilessly terrifying to those formidable evildoers he is sworn to attack.

And the evildoers in the Thunstone series are not only as nasty and satisfyingly vile a bunch of villains as has ever been dreamed up, but they have an outstanding and memorable quality that comes from what I think is Wellman's deep and helpful insight into what we call Evil.

The thesis is that while Evil may occasionally take on very posh overtones and is often accompanied by the gaudiest of trappings, it is basically and invariably stupid and tacky. For all of his flashily attired munions and gorgeously filmed celebrations of power, Adolph Hitler was clearly a dismally third-rate little bastard, and for all their logo-draped towers of commerce and their enormous, highly private palaces the CEOs who have lately stolen such an astounding amount of money from our collective pockets are transparently a scurvy crowd of contemptible bullies and braggarts totally lacking in class.

Rowley Thorne, the greatest of Thunstone's bitter enemies and an extremely unflattering takeoff on Aleister Crowley, is a huge, hairless man with an eagle beak and lead-colored lips and tongue who—though he proudly bears himself like an emperor—wears shabby suits and soiled linen and, thanks to the skilled interferences of Thunstone, routinely sees his vile sorceries end up as a humiliating mess on the floor.

The Shonokins, one of Wellman's very best creations, are a very nasty tribe of schemers who have survived from ancient prehuman times and whose hungry plottings for the return of their world domination are completely flattened, one by one, by the implacable Thunstone and, in "Shonokin Town," are finally and quite mercilessly revealed as a pathetic bunch of ridiculous and third-rate pretenders to the throne.

It was a great pleasure rereading these stories after quite a stretch of time and to find they still are wonderfully entertaining and still raise goose bumps.

Thunstone rules!

I think I've confessed before that I am generally not all that much keen on endless series of wonderland books about the same odd characters (when they broke up what Tolkien intended to be printed as one big book they really started something!), but I'm well aware I cannot strike a lofty pose and sneer at those who consume them avidly for I, too, am a hopeless addict of the works of a master of another variant of fantasy: Harry Turtledove, the absolute king of historical what if novels.

The Center Cannot Hold (by Harry Turtledove. Ballantine Books, NYC, hard cover, 503 pages. $27.95), which is a brilliant guess as to what might have happened if a huge swath of our history had veered just a little differently (the map of what happened is alone worth the price of admission!), is the second book in the *American Empire Series* which is a continuation of the three prior volumes of *The Great War Series*, which I mightily enjoyed and—God help me—I confess I am eagerly looking forward to reading the next volume and will be perfectly willing to read the next three after that (possibly to be called *There Were No Hippies*) if Harry Turtledove decides to write them.

Actually, I find I am now hooked even worse than before because in the last novel *Blood and Iron*, a striking new element crept into the series that gives the whole thing an interestingly different edge. As in all the rest of the books, *The Center Cannot Hold* is a vast series of chronicles of different people in different areas who are up to different activities illustrating different aspects of the complex what-if world Turtledove built and is developing and you go through the book jumping from advancing chunks of one account to another. But whereas in the other books I divided my interest more or less equally over the field—with maybe a slightly higher spike of interest here and there—in these last two books I have found that the very credibly rendered transformation of the character of Jake Featherston from a noticeably unpleasant artillery sergeant to a hugely important political figure has slowly and insidiously drawn my main interest and attention, followed closely by the doings of Anne Colleton, a wealthy woman of considerable determination and intelligence who's involved in Featherston's clamber to the top (and was responsible for a number of the spikes mentioned above), in turn followed by Clarence Potter, earlier a military intelligence officer and pretty much one of the crowd but now revealed to have a penetrating point of view and much potential in this new situation. And this is changing the whole experience.

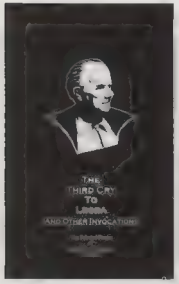
Don't misunderstand me, I am still very interested in the doings of the other characters (for instance I continue to give my full attention to the career of the long-suffering Colonel Abner Dowling who previously had to endure being right-hand man to the very difficult General George Armstrong Custer and now must do the same duty for World War I's General "Black Jack" Pershing) but I confess that as I worked my way through this new novel I found myself more and more scanning the opening lines of the next character segment to see if it was going to concern Jake Featherston or those immediately involved with him and that does change the reading of the book.

It strikes me quite forcibly that it's turned the series into a very interesting Turtledovian demonstration of what happens in actual history when this sort of thing occurs. The emergence of a Hitler or a Stalin or a Mao is so amazing in its power to warp and distort absolutely everything about it! The world is never quite the same after the entrance of one of these horribly freakish and appalling people and so it is with this series of books.

Very creepily instructive!

Every so often some publisher is kind enough to reissue ***The Circus of Dr. Lao*** (by Charles G. Finney, introduction by John Marco, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, trade paperback, 154 pp., $12.95) since it first appeared to considerable success in the mid-1930s. The University of Nebraska is the latest and it is also the first that I have noticed to have had the good sense to include the book's original illustrations by Boris Artzybasheff who afterward went on to establish a long and interesting career as a surreal commercial artist clever enough to persuade the

The Selected Stories of Manly Wade Wellman



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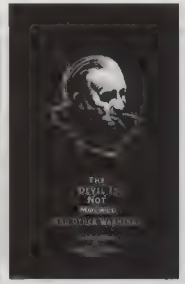

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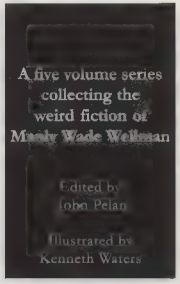
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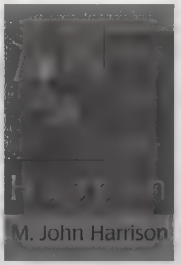

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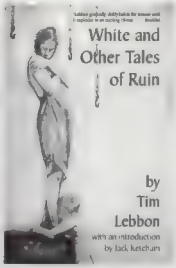

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editors of *Time* and *Life* to let his weird illustrations appear regularly and prominently in their otherwise respectable magazines

The book concerns what happened when a very odd traveling circus run by an old Chinese (he warned that even though the book's attitude is liberal and it does very skillfully mock the racism of its period) decided to put on its strange show in the whistle stop town of Abalone, Arizona

Although it does have a sideshow fortune teller and a magician (no less than Appollonius of Tyana!) the circus scorns expected sideshow animals, preferring to present a werewolf, a sea serpent, and a satyr instead It also features many other attractions never encountered in ordinary road shows so the inhabitants of sleepy little Abalone find themselves in the awesome presence of antique gods and goddesses, not to mention various species of angels and demons

Of course, as you might expect, the citizens of Abalone are not unaffected by this exotic exposure; strange things happen to maiden ladies and bullies and greedy entrepreneurs and it goes without saying that the children of the little town will never again be quite the same

I feel it's my duty as a reviewer to let my readers know that a visit to *The Circus of Dr Lao*, even when it's in the form of a classic of fantasy, may produce serious and possibly permanent alterations But I'm sure the change will do you good

In the Garden of Poisonous Flowers (Subterranean Press, Burton, MI, hardcover, 85 pp ; $20 00) is a neat little book by Caitlin R Kiernan, who has been very deservedly racking up a series of awards for her highly entertaining and truly startling novels and short stories

This offering is a kind of dark bonbon—or maybe *amuse gueule* might be a tad more appropriate It's her first novella and introduces Dancy Flammarion, the spunky young albino woman who later appears to excellent effect in Kiernan's novel, *Threshold*

The little story starts when Dancy is given a lift in the small hours on a lonely Georgia road in a Monte Carlo driven by the Bailiff, a fine study in folksy villainy, and his two passengers, Bobby and the Dead Girl. She is driven to a stately old home in Savannah wherein the nine ladies of League and Society engage in their traditional Saturday night indulgences first involving Spanish absinthe in the Yellow Room, then dinner and a little concert until it's time to retire to the basement with its three marble embalming tables to dissect dead young women and cull souvenirs

The Garden of Poisonous Flowers is, as you may have already gathered, a fine example of high Goth inventively rendered and is full of intriguing characters and interesting situations It plays many extremely ambiguous games up to and including being simultaneously decadent and uplifting. It is also, cover to cover unceasingly amusing

As an additional treat the book is profusely illustrated by "Dame Darcy" and I enjoyed each and every drawing including the interior ones showing postmortem portraits and the

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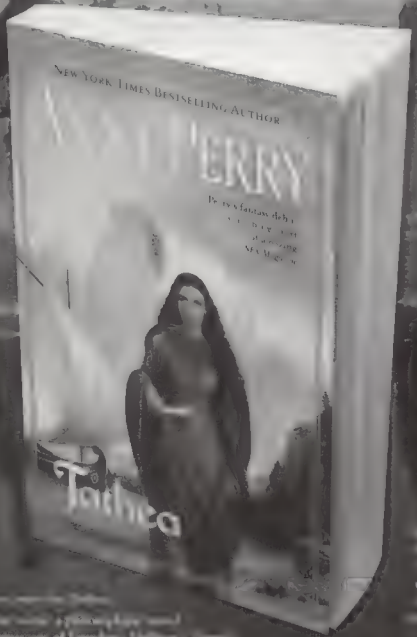

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stuffed bear in the study and the spectacular endpapers showing the nine ladies in their basement lair enjoying a nice dissection session.

Not for all tastes and I'd definitely recommend keeping it away from the kids unless you don't mind eventually running into a whole lot of trouble

It is difficult to imagine how such a distinguished group of authors and artists became involved in such a feckless project but the nation has come on hard times and perhaps they needed the money

A Walking Tour of the Shambles (by Gene Wolfe and Neil Gaiman, illustrations by Randy Broecker and Earl Geier, cover by Gahan Wilson; American Fantasy, Woodstock, IL, trade paperback, 51 pp ,$15 00) purports to be a guidebook (in the "Little Walks for Sightseers" series) to a perfectly awful area supposedly located in the Near North Side of Chicago called "The Shambles." The tone of its authors' increasingly nervous and eventually totally despairing comments clearly indicates that anyone who has been foolish enough to take the first step on their tour has been made a fool of and is obviously doomed

One can only hope it is a work of fiction

Gahan Wilson

The Translator, John Crowley, William Morrow, NY, hardcover, 304 pp , $24 95

It should be no secret to readers of these pages that John Crowley is his generation's preeminent practitioner of contemporary fantasy and among the best writers at work today in any genre. Crowley's novels are worlds unto themselves, lovingly and precisely constructed word palaces that, like the Drinkwater house in his 1981 masterpiece, *Little, Big,* get bigger the farther in you go. If he has a weakness as a writer, it's his tendency to grow so entranced in exploring the elaborate branchings of his narratives that he loses interest in coming out again. In an earlier novel, *Engine Summer* (1979), Crowley dubbed these physical and metaphysical detours the "snake's-hands" of a story. His three prior novels—*Aegypt* (1987), *Love & Sleep* (1994), and *Daemonomania* (2000)—suffered progressively from such narrative detours, though the writing itself did not. Crowley is incapable of crafting a bad sentence, his lambent style seduces eye and ear, communicating the most esoteric ideas and the earthiest actions with the same breathtaking clarity

In *The Translator,* Crowley resists the temptation of snake's-hands and brings all his considerable talents to bear in the service of a delicate, deeply moving story of love, sacrifice, and poetry set in the uncertain days preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis

It is 1962. Kit Malone is a freshman at a large Midwestern university. A promising poet, she has not written a line in over a year, since becoming pregnant, suffering a miscarriage, and attempting suicide. Innokenti Falin is a newly exiled Russian poet teaching an advanced class in poetry at the university. Kit, powerfully if mysteriously drawn to Falin, talks her way into his class on the strength of a poem written in high school. Falin, equally taken with Kit, asks her help in translating his poems into English

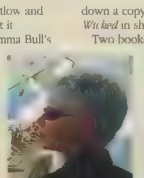
Kit and Falin are enormously appealing characters, two of Crowley's most fully realized fictional creations. Writing with deep compassion and sensitivity, he traces their relationship from its awkward beginnings through its seemingly miraculous yet inevitable evolution into mature, mutually healing love. But all is not rhymes and roses. The campus—indeed, the whole country—is gripped by the shrill anti-Communist paranoia of kneejerk McCarthyism. The government and its casually sinister agents (FBI and otherwise) have their collective eye on Falin .. and on Kit, too

If this were all there was to *The Translator,* it would be nothing more—and nothing less—than a superb piece of mainstream fiction. But Crowley being Crowley, there is much, much more. As Kit and Falin become friends and partners, and as government agents secretly and not so secretly infiltrate the campus to undermine a student protest movement in which Kit is peripherally involved, angelic powers are secretly struggling to determine whether our world will survive the coming Missile Crisis or be destroyed in nuclear conflagration. Falin has a pivotal role to play in this celestial drama . , though

Nicola Griffith Is Reading . . .

The fantastic short fiction I've read lately falls into two distinct camps. The kind of stories that appear in the *New Yorker*—Jeffrey Eugenides, A.S. Byatt, Haruki Murakami, and so on—begun beautifully, with fine sentences, palpable atmosphere, and clearly delineated character, but then dissolve. Sometimes it's because the writer substitutes a post-modern narrative knowingness for an ending (e.g., Eugenides). Sometimes they appear to be wandering about lost in a fog until in despair they throw something down, write "The End," and walk off, mumbling, hoping no doubt that no one notices the story doesn't make any sense (e.g., Byatt—though her collection, *Elementals,* is worth checking out).

Writers of YA genre fantasy, on the other hand, understand that you can stun the reader's right brain more deeply with the mysticism of the fantastic if you can can fool the analytical left brain into thinking things have been explained. The trap there is to take the idea too far and turn mystery into dullness. Two writers in the new Viking anthology, *The Green Man,* edited by Ellen Datlow and Terry Windling, get it absolutely right. Emma Bull's story feels both true to life and wonderfully weird, while Gregory Maguire takes the familiar story of Jack and the Beanstalk and transforms it into a side-splittingly funny take on how things might have gone in a class-conscious society. I've read a couple of novels by Bull (try *Bone Dance* if you like science fiction or *War for the Oaks* if you like fantasy) and I'll be tracking down a copy of Maguire's *Wicked* in short order.



Two books I've enjoyed recently outside the genre are *Wild Nights,* by Anne Matthews, which is non-fiction stuffed with fascinating tidbits about the return of wildlife to our cities (did you know there are more deer in Washington DC than lawyers?), and *Carter Beats the Devil,* by Glenn David Gold, a novel set in the 1920s about a stage magician and illusionist, Carter the Great ❧

it is a role whose profound costs and consequences Kit will not come to understand or accept for many years

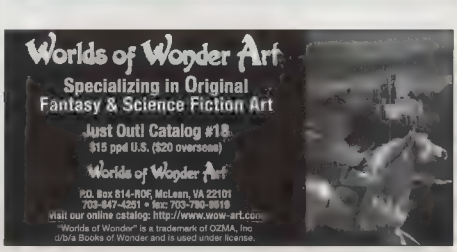
Crowley's touch is deft and subtle as he weaves fantastic threads into the tapestry of history, making the familiar strange and the strange somehow familiar without in any way trivializing or diminishing the human significance not only of Kit and Falin's time together but of the traumatic events that characterized the early 1960s The result is a nearly flawless minor masterpiece, his most successful, accessible, and satisfying performance in years

A Scattering of Jades, Alexander C Irvine, Tor, NY, hardcover, 428 pp , $25 95.

In this impressively accomplished debut, Alexander C Irvine combines elements of blood-drenched Aztec mythology with sharply rendered historical detail and characters drawn from mid-19th century, pre-Civil War America to create a fast-paced, grippingly apocalyptic melting pot of a novel that calls to mind the historical fantasies of Tim Powers and S P Somtow, yet quickly establishes its own distinctive voice and sensibility

The story centers around Archie Prescott's search for his daughter, Jane, abducted from New York in 1835 to serve as a sacrifice in a magical ceremony that will destroy the current world and usher in an age dominated by the evil Aztec god Tlaloc, whose thirst for human blood is ruthless Tlaloc's earthly avatar is a powerful shaman known as the chacmool, discovered in an ancient burial chamber deep within Kentucky's Mammoth Cave by a spelunking slave Stephen Bishop

Bishop, who was in fact a notable early explorer of Mammoth Cave, is one of a number of historical personages enlivening these pages Others are P T Barnum, Aaron Burr and Edgar Allan Poe Gracefully mixing the real and the imaginary, Irvine jumps nimbly from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character to character as his plot accelerates and the major players converge on Mammoth Cave, in whose stygian depths a climactic confrontation will take place

Irvine's writing displays a fine eye for the grotesque and a delightfully macabre sense of humor His descriptions of the surreal underground spaces of Mammoth Cave are both physically and psychologically acute. At the same time, he invests his dark fantasy with genuine moral significance, raising questions about freedom, slavery, race, and the responsibilities of love that are every bit as germane today as they were in the 1840s Although Irvine's control over his sprawling narrative occasionally slips, and his pacing falters somewhat toward the end before regaining its stride, *A Scattering of Jades* is a gem of a first novel

Sir Apropos of Nothing, Peter David, Pocket Books, NY, mass-market paper, 647 pp., $6.99

If there were ever a genre that cried out for sharp and nimble satire, that genre is heroic fantasy, whose ranks are crowded with works pretentious, sententious, and just plain never enditious Yet while there are plenty of fantasies with satirical elements full-blown satires are rare

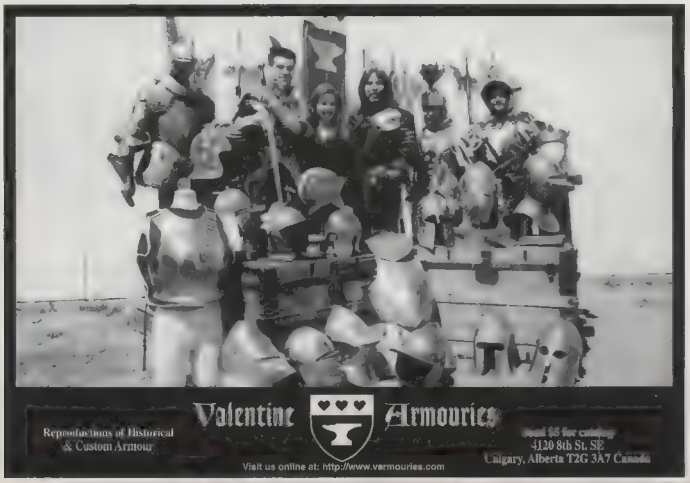
Enter Peter David and *Sir Apropos of Nothing,* a wickedly funny satire whose eponymous antihero combines the moral scruples and withered limb of Shakespeare's Richard III with the cowardly and conniving self-interest of George MacDonald Fraser's Harry Flashman and the malicious tongue of Rowan Atkinson's Blackadder David was known to me prior to this as the author of competently written novelizations and media tie-ins, but *Apropos* is more than competent. It's an inspired original that gleefully skewers every cliché of heroic fantasy and has the courage, behind a stream of absurdities and one-liners that will have readers alternately chuckling and groaning, to follow its opportunistic antihero into some dark places indeed

Apropos is conceived after his mother, Madelyne, a tavern wench with a thing for knights in shining armor (well, out of shining armor, actually), is brutally gang-raped by knights in the service of King Runcible of Isteria. Born with a damaged leg, the identity of his father a mystery, Apropos grows up despised by everyone except the noble Tacit, who befriends him thus causing the contrary Apropos to secretly hate him After Madelyne's murder by another unidentified knight—Apropos sets off for the court of King Runcible, there to demand vengeance for his mother's death

His quest for revenge unexpectedly leads Apropos (dragging his heels the whole way) into assorted Dangerous Adventures. First as squire to the doddering Sir Umbrage of the Flaming Nether Regions, then as the escort of the royal princess and sometime arsonist, Entipy Along the way, he encounters his boyhood friend Tacit, now Tacit One-Eye, a hero with a glorious destiny before him which Apropos promptly steals for his own

David takes chances in this book Witty and capable of roguish charm though he may be, Apropos is by no means an admirable human being. Readers will be shocked by behavior that again and again runs counter to every unwritten rule of heroic fantasy ... to say nothing of common decency. Yet despite his flaws—or, rather, because of them—Apropos turns out to be an engaging creation By cutting away the tired and formulaic clichés choking the genre, David has found his way back to something fresh and vital. I look forward to the sequel! ❧

Paul Witcover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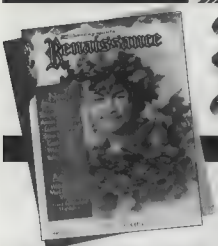

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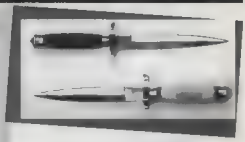

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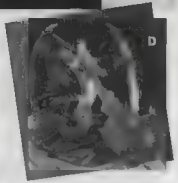

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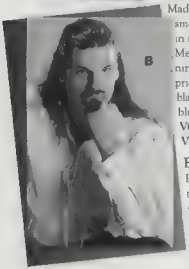

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Penance, Power, and Pursuit: On the trail of the Wild Hunt.

Peter No. 1 60th No. Nightmare Abbeyn from Lafadino Books (Overlook Press, 1987)

Herne the Hunter, wearing antlers on his head, rides his black horse through Windsor Forest Shakespeare wrote of Herne in The Merry Wives of Windsor

The calkins clinkered to a spark
The hunter called the pack;
The sheep-dogs' fells all bristled stark
And all their lips went back

"Lord God," the shepherds said, "They come.
And see what hounds he has.
All dripping bluish fire and dumb,
And nosing to the grass

"And trotting scatheless through the gorse,
And bristling in the fell
Lord, it is death upon the horse,
And they're the hounds of hell!"

John Masefield from "The Hounds of Hell"

Even in winter, you are not safe.

Stay indoors, attend your hearths. Try to keep the night at bay by the telling of your tongue Remember your kin, honor your ancestors For at this time the dead begin to stir, riding upon hallowed and familiar roads, galloping through villages and wastes, flying through the forests of the mind Such raids are reminders that the past is not a dead thing, but may return, like a hunter, to follow us for a time

Although found throughout Europe, its origins spreading far back into the mythic past, it must be remembered that the ghostly Wild Hunt is always a local phenomenon. Local heroes of history and legend get called up to join the ranks of a long succession of strange, spectral Hunt leaders, each particular to and returning something of his or her own landscape and historical period. Each variation of the story sheds a bit more light on its possible interpretations. So, if you want to see the Hunt in all its ghostly splendor, you must be willing to follow a long and perilous trail through the folk traditions of many periods and lands

The Wild Hunt, as it is most commonly known, is ancient in origin, an embodiment of the memories of war, agricultural myth, ancestral worship, and royal pastime Its most complete and well-documented traditions lie with the peoples of northern Europe; however, there are reflections of the Hunt anywhere in literature or folk tradition where the dead travel together over the land, where heroes rise up to rout a foreign foe, or where representatives of the sovereignty of the land are threatened and pursued. We even find versions of the Hunt in Ovid and the classical tradition Indeed, wherever there are tales of invasions, we will likely find stories of a ghostly hunt following close on the heels of myth or history

One of the earliest writers to refer to the Hunt is Tacitus who recorded accounts of the tribes of Germania at the end of the first century C.E. He writes of the Harii, a Gaulish tribe who conducted fearful raids against their enemies:

[They] are a fierce people who enhance their natural savageness by art and the choice of time. Their shields are black, their bodies painted black, and they choose black nights for battles and produce terror by the mere appearance, terrifying and shadowy, of a ghostly army No enemy can withstand a vision that is strange and, so to speak, diabolical, for in all battles, the eyes are overcome first

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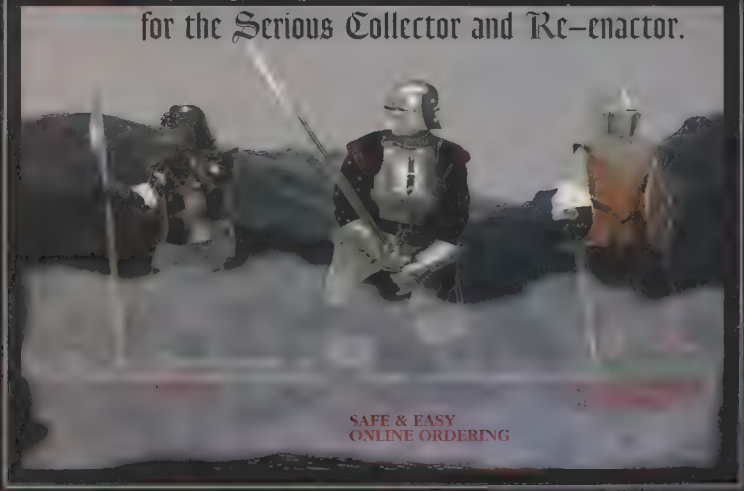

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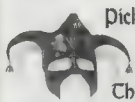

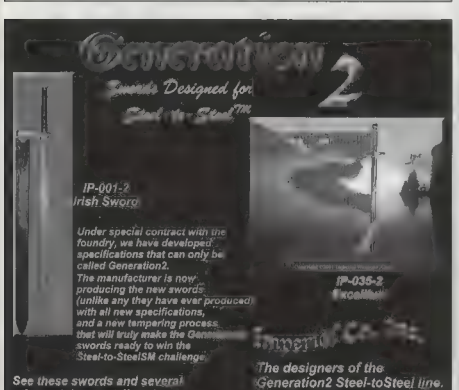
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Although Tacitus provides primarily historical and ethnographic reports, we find the origins of the Hunt tradition in accounts rife with the terrible memories of invasions: night raids against the home, torches beyond the trees, unintelligible voices of unknown enemies moving beneath the moon. Such cultural memories become the stuff of legend. Even the most arcane tale may have its roots in actual events, moments of experience so powerful that they engrave themselves upon the collective memory and are relived and revived in the ghost stories of successive generations.

Not surprisingly, stories of the Hunt are most widely told among people and in countries that have either been invaded frequently or who are frequent invaders themselves. Thus Norse, Anglo-Saxon, British, and German peoples retain strong ties to folklore of the Hunt.

In the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark the Hunt was most often named after its leader, Odin. It was called *Odensjakt* (Odin's Hunt), *Oskeret* (Hornfic or Thunderous Ride), the *Gandreid* (Ride of the Dead), and the *Asgardreid* (Ride of Asgard). This Norse version of the Hunt was often seen pursuing a beautiful Otherworldly maiden—perhaps a memory of grim night chases conducted by invading armies for purposes of stealing wives from their enemies. Such imagery also seems to refer to struggles for supremacy between rising patriarchal gods (embodied in the Hunt and its antlered warrior leader) and ancient European goddess cults.

In France we find the Hunt under the name of "The Family of the Harlequin." Two theories persist on the origin of this name. One (by Guerber) states that another form of the name "*Mesnée d'Hellequin*" is a derivative of the name for the Norse goddess, guardess of death, Hel. Another more plausible theory explains that "Harlequin" is an evolution of the name "Herlathing." Walter Map, writing in the 12th century, tells of the *Herlethingus*, perhaps (according to Simpson) a corruption from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning "meeting, gathering, court of judgment." Map goes on to say that such nocturnal companies and squadrons were common appantions during the time of King Henry II. They were troops engaged in

> endless wandering, in an aimless round . . . and in them many persons who were known to have died were seen alive. They travel as we do, with wagons and sumpter horses, packsaddles and panniers, hawks and hounds, and a concourse of men and women. Those who saw them first raised the whole country against them with horns and shouts . . . but they rose into the air and vanished suddenly. (Translated in Simpson)

In Old English, King Herla would be *Herla cyning*. Written in 1123, the *Ordericus Vitalis* called it *familia Herlechini*, and in the 14th-century poem "Mum and the Sothsegger," a

rabble-rouser is referred to as *Hurlewarris Kynne*, kindred of Hurlawaun

Leaders of the Pack

In Germany where many tales of the Hunt have survived and are still being reenacted today, the Hunt is still commonly associated with Odin and called Wotan's Hunt. Other names were Wotan's Army and the *Wilde Jagd*. The Wild Hunt in Germany was also known to be led by several female deities - Perchta, Holda, and the White Lady known as Frau Gauden all led processions of unbaptized children and witches through the night sky. The fields they rode past would produce double the usual harvest the next year. Such deities all tended to rule over fertility and domestic spheres: planting, spinning, weaving, and childbearing. These European Hunt goddesses (increasingly associated with agricultural and domestic fertility in the Middle Ages) seem to share associations with Diana, Artemis of classical tradition, who was herself a hunter, dealing out punishment for insults and violations of hunting related taboos. As the horned moon goddess, she may have lent another important association

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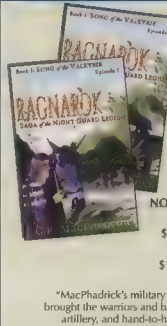
"We may never know our true and original story, for what is history yet to come may prove to be the future long past."

C.R. MacPhadrick



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TOP: A wild, horned rider abducts a woman or female spirit (from Olaus Magnus, A Description of the Northern Peoples, *1558) BOTTOM. In Shakespeare's* The Merry Wives of Windsor, *the lustful Sir John Falstaff is the victim of an elaborate hoax tricked into posing as Herne the Hunter, he succumbs to the magic of the wood and believes himself the prey of a troop of enraged faeries (engraved by I Taylor, Jun., from* The Boydell Shakespeare Prints*)*

to the Hunt leader in the form of antlers, an ancient symbol that serves to blur the boundary between hunter and hunted

The myth of the great Calydonian hunt told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* begins because Oenus, king of Calydon, forgets to make offerings to Diana He recognizes only the agricultural gods, but leaves Diana's altar empty at the festival of first fruits. As punishment, she sends a giant boar to destroy his kingdom. The boar pays particular attention to uprooting the fields, a harsh reminder to agricultural people of their previous reliance on hunting and the necessity of maintaining a hunting tradition to stem the hardship of a failed crop. The hunt is eventually successful (though Meleager, its leader dies later by the hands of his own mother) leading the hunting party back into the ancient forgotten forests to achieve their twofold goal· killing the boar and remembering the hunting goddess through the ritual performance of her favorite sport Folk lore of the Wild Hunt may be derived, in part, from such myths or the memories of their ritual reenactment

Regardless of their regional names, all Hunts seem to share several common features wherever they appear. a spectral leader, a following train, announcement by a great baying of hounds, crashes of lightning, and loud hoofbeats along with the Huntsman's shouts of "Hallioo!" Death and war often follow in their wake

Although the leader of the Hunt varies by location, its association with death imagery remains a constant. Its most frequent master is Odin or one of his many avatars, and no doubt his role as the god of dead heroes makes him particularly appropriate here Even Odin's horse, Sleipnir, is suggestive of funerary imagery: its eight legs are thought to represent four men (two legs apiece) carrying a corpse Whether under the name of Grim or Wotan, when led by the gallows god, the Hunt becomes a terrifying, roving memorial of the ancient dead and the physical routes they have taken to and from their graves

An example of one of these routes can be found in Grim's Ditch, an Iron Age Anglo-Saxon fortification containing mounds, forts and most importantly, burial chambers. Overlooked by Grim's Ditch is a path thought to have once been used for the Deadman s Ride the funerary route of a ghostly rider and his dog (Briggs) The association of the Deadman's Ride with the Wild Hunt is clearly one of shared imagery. The dead Huntsman rides the trail on his horse with his hounds behind him, seeking or fleeing his own barrow. In this way, the Hunt often remembers funeral tracks long forgotten or disused. A living tradition in Devon tells of the Lych Way, a medieval funeral path used by the ancient moor-men to carry corpses across Dartmoor to their interment. While it has not been used since the 13th century, ghostly processions are still seen there, proof of the widespread belief that any route over which a corpse is carried must be remembered and respected. Thus, seeing the spectral Hunt or telling one of the many stories associated with it are themselves acts of recognition and respect, ways to give currency and vitality to important aspects of both landscape and tradition

Ranging in England's Windsor Forest, Herne the Hunter is well known from both folklore and literary traditions Herne's name possibly relates him to the earlier Celtic deity, Cernunnos, who, as an antlered lord of animals, had a widespread cult stretching from continental Europe to Ireland Although a frequent apparition in local folklore, he is perhaps best known from his brief mention on the early English stage

> There is an old tale goes, that Herne the Hunter
> (Sometimes a keeper here in Windsor forest)
> Doth all the winter-time, at still midnight,
> Walk round about an oak, with great ragg'd horns
> And there he blasts the tree, and takes the cattle,
> And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a chain
> In a most hideous and dreadful manner
> You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know
> The superstitious idle-headed eld
> Receiv'd and did deliver to our age
> This tale of Herne the Hunter for a truth
>
> (Shakespeare *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 4 4 28-38)

Here, Herne and Cernunnos, who is often met in the forest seated upon a mound, bellowing to a congregation of assorted wild beasts, are made one by England's greatest dramatic folklorist

In Wales, the Huntsman is Gwynn Ap Nudd, who also serves as Lord of the Dead and of the Fairy realm As leader of the Wild Hunt, he drives the *Cun Annwn*, or the Hounds of the Otherworld (more popularly called the Hounds of Hell, although Annwn is not a Christian Hell at all but instead a land of splendor and dignity) These dogs are all white with red ears and accompany Gwynn in the pursuit of the souls of the recently deceased. He also appears in *The Mabinogion*, in the medieval Welsh story of "How Culhwch Won Olwen" as part of an enormous battalion of King Arthur's knights (a Wild Hunt in and of themselves) who ride forth to hunt the giant boar, Twrch Trwyth, when it attempts to destroy Britain (again we see how the Hunt is roused when the sovereignty of the land is threatened) At the time of the hunt in this story, Arthur may in fact already be dead (See the speech given by Arthur's gatekeeper as well as the story "The Dream of Rhonabwy," where, after his death, he is met in the Otherworld while Britain is under attack) As inner-world guardian of the land, however, he calls up his men to protect their native soil from foreign aggression

Other early texts seem to allude to Faerie associations of the Hunt In the medieval poem, "Sir Orpheo," we chance upon the Faerie Hunt, or *rade*

> There often by him would he see
> when noon was hot on leaf and tree
> the king of Faerie with his rout
> came hunting in the woods about
> with blowing far and crying dim,
> and barking hounds that were with him
> yet never a beast they took nor slew
> and where they went they never knew
> (trans Tolkien)

The Hunting parties of Faerie were not in the habit of seeking animal quarry Most medieval stories of Faerie and human interaction generally involve abductions and thus may be tied (at least thematically) to the larger Wild Hunt tradition wherein human souls are chased as prey. More frequently in recent folklore, the Hunt is led by the Devil. But the designation of the Devil as Huntsman is likely little more than a Christian refashioning of a pre-Christian tradition; it is commonplace in folklore to find the name of the Devil attached to any site or character that once held a place of reverence in pagan belief Thus, any site dedicated to a pre-Christian god becomes the Devil's Tump or the Dewer Stone or the like In fact, we can often use the appearance of the Devil in such stories to denote the presence of pre-Christian practice or mythological figures, even though their specific natures or names are lost

Joining the Team

Although doubtless an exciting job, being enlisted into the Hunt is a dubious sort of honor, for it is associated with penance and

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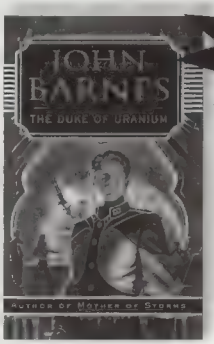

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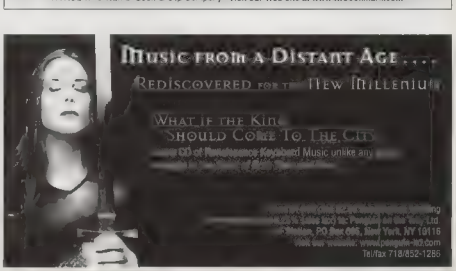
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punishment as well as power. Such power, when present in the stories, comes in the form of Otherworldly status conveyed upon earthly kings or heroes, a way of keeping their memory alive by placing them *into* the landscape, associating them with successive generations of traditional lore and ghostly heroes. But before applying for the job of Huntsman, one should ask oneself whether such Otherworldly status is really a gift. And is a permanent purgatorial place in the lore worth the price of admission?

Several kings—historical and legendary—have led the Hunt in their turns and found out the hard way that deals with the Otherworld have unpredictable payoffs. First among the ranks of cursed legendary hunters is King Herla, who strikes a bargain with the Faerie King, each promising to attend the wedding of the other's child. This is done, but when Herla makes ready to leave Fairyland (located within the hills) with his entourage, he is given a small bloodhound by his Otherwordly host as a parting gift, with these instructions: "Do not dismount until this dog leaps to the ground from the lap it is sitting in." After riding for some time, one man in the procession gets weary and dismounts, immediately turning to dust as his feet touch the soil. The party rides farther on until they meet a man upon the road who tells them that the name of Herla hasn't been heard in those lands for centuries. The little dog never descends, and Herla becomes the Hunt Lord, his train of men following him over the land. His fate is a mystery. Was he punished merely for entering the Otherworld? Or perhaps he broke some rule or other while visiting, by eating perhaps? The cause of his ill fortune is doubtless only known to those hapless souls who travel with him upon his hard road. In the year of King Henry II, Herla's ghostly train reportedly plunged into the river Wye in Herefordshire, and from that hour, it has not been seen.

Admission has its perks as well: By joining the Hunt, heroes can be transformed into supernatural figures. In his *Draco Normannicus* (1167-1169), Etienne de Rouen portrays King Arthur as an Otherworldly ruler, living on in the Underworld after his physical death in a kind of Faerie twilight.

> Then the wounded Arthur seeks after the herbs of his sister; them the sacred isle of Avallon contains. Here the immortal nymph Morgan receives her brother, attends, nourishes, restores, and renders him eternal. The lordship of the antipodean folk is given him. Endowed with faery powers, unarmed, he assumes the warrior's role and fears battles not at all. Thus he rules the lower hemisphere, shines in arms, and the other half of the world is allotted to him ... The antipodeans tremble at his faery sway; the lower world is subject to him. He speeds forth to the upper folk, and sometimes returns to the lowest regions.
> (Translated in Loomis)

Perhaps a depiction of Cernunnos, a horned figure holds the tails of two dogs or wolves. Carved on the north shaft of the market cross in Kells, Ireland (Drawing by Ari Berk, after R.W. Feachem).

Gervase of Tilbury, writing of King Arthur in 1190, goes further by actually recording the additional belief that Arthur becomes the Lord of the Wild Hunt.

> But in the forests of Great and Little Britain exactly similar things are said to have happened, and the wood wardens ... relate that on alternate days, about the hour of noon or in the first silence of night, by moonlight in the full of the moon they have very often seen a band of knights hunting and the noise of hounds and horns, who declared to those who asked that they were the fellowship and household of Arthur. (Translated in Loomis)

Such beliefs retain their currency, for the folklore of numerous countries in Britain still tells of the King Under Stone, or the Hero within the Hill, or the Sleeping Lord, who with his band of knights will awaken in the hour of England's greatest need.

It is out of such a tradition that we hear of Edric the Wild who will also return to lead the Hunt against England's enemies. Although Edric was a Shropshire leader of Harold's time, fighting the Normans from 1067-1070, stories of him were still told well into the 19th century. Many people believed that he was still alive at that time, living within the hills of Shropshire. His appearance was an omen that told of approaching war:

> He cannot die, they say, till all the wrong has been made right, and England has returned to the same state in which it was before the troubles of his days. Meanwhile he is condemned to inhabit the lead mines as a punishment for having allowed himself to be deceived by the Conqueror's fair words into submitting to him. So there he dwells, with his wife and his whole train. The miners call them "the Old Men," and sometimes hear them knocking, and wherever they knock the best lodes are to be found. Now and then they are permitted to show themselves. Whenever war is going to break out, they ride over the hills in the direction of the enemies country, and if they appear, it is a sign that war will be serious. (As told by Miss Burne, recorded in Simpson)

Several other figures lead the Hunt, cursed for religious offences. In Cornwall, a corrupt priest named Dando drives his Dandy Dogs for eternity, cursed for hunting on Sunday. Cain sometimes led the Hunt for the slaying of his brother Abel; Herod's Hunt pursued Holy Innocents; and in another version of the story, a nobleman, Hans von Hackelnberg, is punished for choosing to hunt forever rather than go to heaven.

Even Sir Francis Drake becomes master of the Hunt for a time. Like Arthur and Edric, he is a protector of England and his Hunt courses over the land at times of invasion and foreign threat (however, like any gentleman, he also hunts for sport). Drake's ghost, followed by a pack of spectral hounds, has been seen on Dartmoor's Abbot's Way, an ancient track leading across the moor and ending near Buckland Abbey, Drake's former home. Still lodged in the Abbey is Drake's drum, which may be used to call him back to defend England during times of trouble.

Beasts of the Hunt

> My hide unto the Huntsman
> So freely I would give;
> My body to the hounds,
> For I'd rather die than live.
> So shoot him, whip him, strip him,
> To the Huntsman let him go;
> For he's neither fit to ride upon,
> Nor in any team to draw.
> Poor old horse! You must die!
>
> —Traditional song sung by the Mummers of Richmond, Yorkshire.

Horses and dogs attend every version of the Hunt. The animals are generally black, white or gray. The horses can appear normal or fiery-eyed, with fire issuing from their mouths and nostrils. Often they appear to be missing limbs or having extra ones, like Odin's eight-legged steed, Sleipnir. In Germany the horses, along with the dogs and riders, often appear wounded, missing limbs and/or heads, a clear indication of their Otherworldliness and, perhaps (as the above song seems to suggest), a reference to ritual sacrifice.

Ghostly dogs are described in great detail in British lore and are known by many names. These black, spectral hounds bear almost as many names as the Hunt. In the North they are called Gabriel's Hounds. In Lancashire they are described as monstrous dogs with human heads who foretell of coming death

or misfortune. In Devon they are known as *Yeth, Heath,* or *Wisht* hounds. These hounds issue from inside Wistman's Wood on the eve of St. John (Midsummer), a night when by tradition the careful eye can see the spirits of the dead fly from their graves. Here, among the ancient dwarf oaks and greening stones, Dewer (the Devil) kennels his hounds, and it is still said that no real dog will enter these woods at any time of the year. The Yeth hounds are also associated with the souls of unbaptized children, which they chase across the moor as their prey. But related traditions hold that the dogs are themselves the souls of the unbaptized babes, and they instead chase the Devil across the moor in repayment for his hand in their fate.

In Wales the dogs are the *Cwn Annwn* (Hounds of the Otherworld) often white with red ears and bellies. The corrupt priest Dando had his own beasts, called the Devil's Dandy Dogs. Great black hounds were known as the Norfolk Shuck and Suffolk Shuck. The Hounds of the Hunt all bear a striking resemblance to the "Black Shuck," a solitary creature that has stalked East Anglia for centuries with fiery eyes as big as saucers. In England such solitary dogs are often the ghosts of deceased people, changed as punishment, and will sometimes help people if treated kindly.

In several Norse versions of the Hunt, the Huntsman would leave a small black dog behind. The dog had to be kept and carefully tended for a year unless it could be driven away. The only known way to frighten it away was to boil beer in eggshells, a curious ritual act seemingly related to the traditional method of getting rid of a Faerie changeling.

Relations with the Hunt

Chances are, meeting the Hunt is going to be the beginning of a bad night, but good or ill will befall you largely depending on your response to such a meeting. The prudent traveler will take pains to avoid it altogether, still, you may ask, "What can I do to protect myself from the Hunt should it happen my way?

If you treat the Huntsman with respect and reverence, or show cleverness, you might be rewarded for it. The "Tale of Wod, the Wild Huntsman" tells the story of a drunken peasant returning home from town when the Hunt descends upon him. When a voice yells out 'In the middle of the path!" he ignores it and is forced into a tug of war contest with Wod (Odin). The peasant outsmarts Wod by wrapping his end of the chain around a tree. Wod congratulates him and gives him a share of a freshly killed stag. The man has no bucket, so Wod fills the man's boot with blood and his sack with meat. By morning the man's gift is impossibly heavy as it has turned to gold (Ashliman).

Shouting to the Hunt in reverence might get you gifted with a horse's leg, which if kept until morning will turn into gold. Anyone seeing the Hunt could request a sprig of parsley from its leader, which would protect from the

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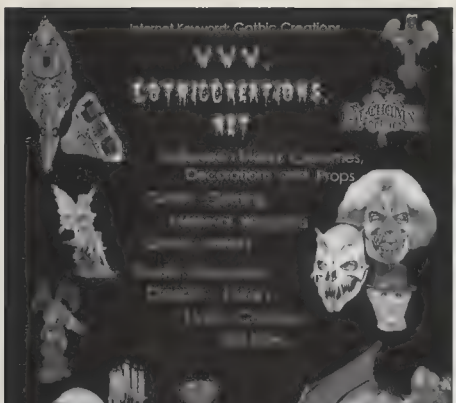

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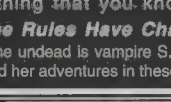

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madness and death brought on by seeing the Hunt. In Strassburg, people who hold the hounds of the Danish Huntsman are given presents that later turn to gold, and in Northern Germany, foam wiped from the Huntsman's horse turns to gold pieces.

There are dire consequences for failing to respect the Hunt. One story tells of a miller's son who rudely yells out to the Hunt "Take me with you!" to which the Huntsman replies "If you want to hunt, you can also eat," and throws him a human leg. Human limbs are the most common "gifts" given to those who mock or show disrespect to the Wild Hunt, but there are worse rewards. In one frightening version, a man coming home from Widecombe Fair calls out to the Huntsman, "Hey Huntsman! What sport have you had? Give us some of your game!" The Huntsman then tosses him a small bundle which is later revealed to be the man's smallest child dead. This tale warns that in disrespecting the Hunt, we turn our back on the past and diminish our connections to both the land and our ancestral guardians. The cost of such behavior is borne by our children.

Should due respect and reverence not be sufficient, there are other ways to protect oneself from the Furious Host. The most common are prayer and the brandishing of crosses, though this only tends to make the dead angry as it reminds them of a heaven they are not likely to see. Another method involves throwing oneself to the ground face down and holding tight to any plants or tufts of grass one can find. This 14th-century German charm may also prove efficacious against the Wild Hunt:

Women's host and this men
Who are bearing wreeth and willow twigs
Broken on the wheel and hanged.
You must go away from here.
[illegible]

Based on this charm, it appears as though Woden is traveling with dead criminals those broken on the wheel and hanged, offering further support for the idea that the Hunt served as punishment or a kind of earthly limbo. But more than this, this charm evidences the very prevalent early modern belief that the spirits of people who died before their time (such as warriors, criminals, and suicides) had to remain on earth, suspended between this world and the Other.

Seasons of the Hunt

Although it may be met any night of the year (especially those associated with the dead or their festivals), the Hunt is most prevalent on winter nights, particularly between Yule and Twelfth Night. This goes back to the very old belief that the dead walk among the living during Yule. Ancestors were honored at this season and food was often left out for them because the relationship between the living and the dead was essential for the well-being

of livestock and family. The Wild Hunt may then be associated with ancestral spirits who come to collect their portion of the year's spoils in return for a good harvest the following year.

During Christmas and Twelfth Night, Norwegian peasants would leave a sheaf or a measure of grain in the fields to feed the Huntsman's horse. Until the beginning of this century, young men in Norway enacted the Wild Hunt at Winter Solstice. Costumed and masked they embodied the souls of their ancestors. Their task was to punish those who violated the rural traditions, usually by stealing beer and livestock. If the riders were given food and drink, however, they brought prosperity.

Wild Hunt as Folk Practice

Medieval records of the Wild Hunt may in fact be descriptions of ritual folk dramas and processions. K.H. Gundarsson cites Vulpius 16th-century description of the Nurnberg *Fastnacht* train as "the wild host, very strange figures, horned, beaked, tailed ... roaring and shouting."

Behind, on a black, wild steed, Frau Holda, the Wild Huntress, blowing into the hunting horn, swinging the cracking whip, her head-hair shaking about wildly like a true wonder-outrage." He also observes, "Similar living traits appear in the Tirol, such as the *Perchtenlauf* described by J.V. v. Zingerle in 1857.

> It was a kind of masked procession. The masked ones were called Perchten. They were divided into beautiful and ugly ... The beautiful Perchten often distributed gifts. So went it loudly and joyfully, if the wild Perchte herself did not come among them. If this spirit mixed among them, the game was dangerous. One could recognize the presence of the wild Perchte when the Perchten raged all wild and furious and sprang over the well-stock. In this case the Perchten ran swiftly away from each other in fear and tried to reach the nearest best house. For as soon as one was under a roof, the Wild One could not have them any longer. Otherwise she would tear apart anyone, who she could get possession of. Even today, one can see places where the Perchten torn apart by the wild Perchte he buried. (Sitten, *Bräuuche, und Meinungen des Tiroler Volkes*, in Hofler, p. 59)

As recently as the 1940s the Hunt was heard going through West Coker near Taunton on Halloween night. And the unlucky visitor to the West Country of England may still meet the Hunt upon the moors. But whether in chronicle or legend, in folk practice or personal experience, the Hunt's underlying meaning and message remains one of remembrance. Remember the dead, your kin, so your crops may grow by ancestral blessing; honor them lest they come like warriors to the field claiming tribute. Give the dead their due: a passing thought, a furtive glance, and the telling of their tale. ❧

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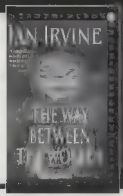

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If you're unlucky, the world can crash down around you in a horrific fashion. If you're lucky, you'll have a safe place to hide

VIDA

By Leigh Kennedy • Illustration by John Picacio

Vida knew all the different ways her mother could whine, nag, shout, and weep. Those nuances had created the core of their family conversations since her stepfather moved in three years before

So, even from where she sat at the kitchen table, unable to comprehend her French homework, her mother's gargled cry of terror alarmed her. Then she heard a strange thumping.

A sudden, meaty silence fell; Vida had never heard that before

Her stepfather paused in his drunken mutters and clumsy stumbling Something smashed, like a lamp, glass tinkling and falling on the floor.

His footstep groaned on the stairway.

"Vida!" he shouted

Vida dived under the kitchen table, tugging the cloth a few inches farther down on the side facing the door

She could see his hands. One of them held her flute—or, more accurately, half her flute. Instead of the mouthpiece, a jagged point was smeared with something reddish-brown (nail varnish? henna shampoo?) His other hand clenched and unclenched as if working out a cramp. Steadily, he shuffled toward the stove and stood in front of it. Vida could only see the back of his dark gray trousers. In his right hand, his finger rubbed a bent key on her broken flute

Something

fluffy, tangled from it. Vida frowned, trying to work out what he'd done with it.

The curl of fluff is Mum's hair, she realized. *The reddish stuff is blood.*

She smelled gas.

The odor grew stronger while her stepfather stood motionless, soundless, as if he had fallen asleep on his feet. Vida tried to hold her breath against the gas, frightened to move. She knew she couldn't stay under the table. When she finally crawled out, her stepfather never turned to look her way, but stared steadily into the oven, waiting.

Vida ran out the front door on her tiptoes in long, light strides.

The road was dark and wet, the neighboring windows only faintly lit behind curtains. A bang and a blossom of light made a moment of day. Heat seared her back for a few seconds but a gust pushed her across the road.

For the first time, Vida saw the door, textured and gnarled, with iron strappings. She stood, watching a flickering of light playing on the mulboned window of the strange house, then she picked up the huge wrought iron ring and let it fall with a resounding thud.

Although Vida couldn't recall having seen her before, the neighbor who opened the door had a familiar, kind face, something like her own dead granny.

"Hello, Vida," the woman said. "Come in. Are you in trouble?"

Vida almost looked over her own shoulder. She could hear shouting above the crackling and hissing noises from across the road. "I can't understand my French homework," she said.

The woman, whose skin looked oiled and softly wrinkled around the eyes and mouth, smiled. "You're too tired. We'll let you sleep. Perhaps you'll dream in French. People often work out their problems while they sleep."

Vida nodded.

She entered the house, exhausted. On the way upstairs, she noticed the books crammed into shelves in the hallways, the smell of wood polish, and the sound of people singing together in another room. The stairs creaked slightly, the voices became fainter as they climbed.

"No, I don't want to go upstairs," Vida said suddenly, turning back toward the woman behind her. Her heart was pounding and she felt light-headed as she recalled the sound of her stepfather's feet on the stairs.

"It's safe here." Speaking softly, the woman shook her head at Vida. She opened the second door on the landing, almost too low for Vida to step through without ducking slightly. "Sleep well, dear."

Inside the room was a single bed with a knitted cover, a small wardrobe, a table with her homework books. As she crawled into bed, Vida found she was wearing a long, pale blue nightgown. She began a long sleep.

Her stepfather's face, skin peeling and blistered, his hair burnt down to a stubble, rose up over the wooden slats and peered down at her, giving her one of his severe looks, then he sank away again.

At first the house was completely silent in the sunny morning, but began to stir with Vida's consciousness. Again, she heard the voices of several people as if the house held a large family. Then she smelled bacon and toast.

Shivering under her covers, Vida remembered the flute in her stepfather's hand. It grew huge in her mind, as if she were as tiny as a bee, hovering in front of it, studying the lock of her mother's hair. A hissing sound came through Vida's clenched teeth as she tried not to cry. A gloomy cloud suddenly shaded the windows.

Vida jumped out of bed and tried to look outside but the mulboned glass was thick and warped, like the bottoms of wine bottles. She could barely make out the gray strip of road and the jumbled colors of houses along it. Where she thought her house might be was a patch of black.

She opened the wardrobe and found some of her clothes, only a few, and pulled out a top and trousers and dressed quickly.

The woman met her in the hallway before she could go out of the door. "Good morning," she said with a big grin. Today, her hair was down in a long plait over her shoulder, a beaded band fastening it. She wore jeans and a big flowered shirt. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks, Pam," Vida said, remembering the woman's name somehow.

"Breakfast this way," Pam said, waving her forward.

The kitchen was noisy. The radio played a current chart favorite of Vida's. A girl older than Vida cooked bacon while chatting to the gray-haired man sitting at the table. A coffee mug steamed in front of him; he was slightly round-shouldered, probably Pam's husband. Two others were leaving the room just as Vida entered, other voices babbled beyond. A dark-haired boy in glasses, perhaps Vida's age, stood at the sink, hands in the soapy water, scrubbing with concentration.

No one paid particular attention to Vida's arrival except the gray-haired man, who smiled up at her.

"Morning, Vida," he said.

"Hi, Ted." Vida said, his name suddenly coming to her.

Vida sat down at the other end of the kitchen table and watched the good natured girl frying bacon, now singing along with the music. When Pam put a plate full of breakfast in front of her, Vida ate with appetite. Pam, Ted, and the girl studied the blackboard on the wall with a list of names and chores.

"Now that Vida's here, she can rake the leaves with Ravinder," Ted

suggested. He looked at the boy at the sink. "OK?"

The boy half-turned as if to listen but never responded.

Ted gave Vida an expectant look.

"Uhm, OK," Vida said.

Another girl came in and stood with the first one. They were planning a trip. Or one of them was planning a trip to see her Dad. Pam seemed to be listening to them, sitting with her freshly poured coffee. But then she smiled across at Vida. "So, did you dream in French last night?"

Vida shook her head. "I had a strange dream." She frowned, trying to remember it. "Dreamt I was in some sort of hospital. People asking me lots of questions. I couldn't think of any answers. It was awful, everyone staring at me."

Pam nodded. "*That* dream," she said, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. "Most everyone has that dream. Never mind. We'll help you with your homework when you've settled in. I'm afraid you've got a lot of catching up to do in all areas, young lady. You haven't been working as well recently as you can."

Although Pam's voice had a strict edge, her eyes were gentle. And Ted gave her a wink.

Vida nodded. She almost smiled, almost relaxed.

Ravinder

and Vida raked the piles of fallen red, gold, and brown leaves in the back garden. She asked him where he came from and he walked to the other end of the garden, pulling the rake hard through the grass, bringing clumps of mud and roots along with the leaves. It was the third time he had refused to speak to her.

"Suit yourself," Vida said in irritation, wondering if she had offended him or if he just thought she was beneath his attention.

Both hands wrapped around her rake, she tilted her head upward to the cold blue sky, smelling the woody, moldy smell of autumn. What am I doing here? And she thought back to how easily she had accepted everything—

She sat in a nightgown in a plastic chair. A dark-haired man sat on the chair opposite her, watching her face intently.

"—see anything . . ? mother . . .?" His voice was blurred.

Vida remembered the lock of hair on the flute. She had abandoned her mother. Her mother needed her.

"I've got to go!" she said, trying to stand up but she was tied around the middle —

She threw down the rake and ran to what should have been a gate in the fence beside the house. But the high wooden fence had no gate there. She ran to the other side which was the same. And now the house had no back door.

Vida ran around the garden, bouncing hard against the fence wherever she thought there might be a way out. "Muuuummm!" she shouted. "Muuummm!"

Her stepfather's face, skin peeling and blistered, his hair burnt down to stubble, rose up over the wooden slats and peered down at her, giving her one of his severe looks, then he sank away again.

Vida screamed.

Almost

touching knee to knee, Vida and Pam sat on her bed, both of them cross-legged, arms also crossed. Only a candle lit the room.

"I can try to tell you things to make it easier," Pam said, "like 'you couldn't have saved her' and 'she would be glad that you're still alive,' but it will be painful for the rest of your life. Sometimes it will be strong and last for a long time, sometimes it will be a small, remembered pain."

Vida nodded, taking another tissue and wiping her eyes.

"You can stay here as long as you need to."

Vida nodded again.

"I have to go now. If you are hungry or want company, come downstairs. We will have music tonight. OK?" Pam bent her face close to Vida's.

"Not now," Vida said.

"That's OK. But remember, we don't have to think bad things here. We can push them away until we're ready to think about them." Without touching her, Pam slid off the bed and opened the door. "I'll see you later."

When

Vida found the music room, she was surprised at how many people were there—perhaps 25 or 30. Small tables surrounded a piano on a raised platform; the room smelled of wine, garlic, and tomato sauce. A woman sat at the piano, singing a blues ballad, her hands crawling across the keys as if in agony. Her voice had a hoarse edge, not pretty, but emotionally brilliant. Dark-haired and dark skinned, in a long mauve dress, she had the appearance of a professional entertainer.

Vida sat down alone at a table and listened. After several songs, the raw feelings inside her seemed to be shaped into something more meaningful, though abstract, by the music. A young man handed her a mug of hot, spicy fruit drink from a tray of mugs that he carried from table to table. He gave Vida a friendly smile without speaking.

She tried to find a familiar face in the room. In the low light, she saw a pair of glasses reflecting across the room. Ravinder sat in unswerving attention to the music, alone, too.

Wim is dead

The two girls Vida had seen in the kitchen that morning interrupted her thought. "Vida, can we sit with you?" Lori, the thin brunette, asked.

"Sure." Gratified by the fact that they seemed pleased to have discovered her, Vida felt that these older girls liked her. But instead of chatting, they all three listened to the rest of the song.

The singer stood, bowed her head to the applause. When she lifted her face again, tears glimmered in the pale blue lighting, then she walked slowly offstage to sit at one of the tables.

"This is your first music night, isn't it?" said Suzanne. She had a wide face with blonde hair pulled straight back and fastened low.

Vida nodded.

"Do you do any music?"

"I take flute lessons."

"A flute," said Lori, impressed. "That will be good."

Vida shook her head in confusion. "What?"

"When you pick up the flute again. Don't worry, Vida! Only when you're ready!" Suzanne's smile was kind.

Vida tried to smile as well but she knew it probably appeared insincere. She knew that it would take a century before she felt like picking up a flute again. Any flute. She wondered how much Suzanne knew.

She relived the sight of the broken flute and realized that everything must have been blown up in the house.

Suzanne apparently spotted a friend behind Vida and made a little wave. Vida saw the liver-brown weals on her wrist. Their eyes met. Suzanne rubbed her scar. "Don't worry. I'm almost ready to leave and I'll be OK. No one here is hopeless. Not even Ravinder. He's been here ages and has never said a word to anyone. Not even Ted or Pam."

Vida's glance flickered across the room and back again. "But . . ." She couldn't really think of what her question was, it was too big to ask.

Leaning close to Vida, Lori said in a low voice, "I think the best thing is to work hard on your school work, even harder than you would do outside. Then when you go back, you don't have to go

back into the old places." She looked sideways at Suzanne

Suzanne nodded. "Lon's doing really well. She only comes back for tiny visits when she's fed up."

Frightened, Vida felt her heart hammering. "OK."

"What's the matter?" Lon asked.

"I don't have any place to go."

"You'll find a place," Suzanne said. "Hey, look it's George!"

A cool young man came onstage with an electric guitar, grinning. When he began to sing, Vida forgot everything else and found herself singing along and giggling with Lon and Suzanne, just as if they had been friends forever.

After breakfast, Pam directed Vida to take her school books to the library where Ted would help her with her French. There she found Suzanne and Ravinder working on different projects at a long polished table in a room full of books. A skylight brightened the room. Suzanne whispered to Vida that she was working on mathematics. She showed Vida her page with probability trees and they winced together.

Detached from their sociability, Ravinder was drawing. He made an amazingly precise and detailed drawing of the bookshelf and globe across from him.

"Settle down," Ted said to the girls.

He moved Vida to the far end of the table. In her stack of books were her history, English, and French texts with the exercise books she had been using at school. Ted leafed through her French exercise book, catching loose papers of quizzes and worksheets that Vida hadn't pasted in. "You've done some good work here," he said. Then he opened her text in front of her. "Where do you feel you should begin today? Not too easy, not too hard."

She found the passage she had been working on at home when—

"OK." Ted scratched his gray head. "Turn the pages back in your book to the spot you feel is easy."

The pages of the book reminded her of her classroom. Her chair must be empty at school. What were they all saying about her? Her mind wandered from French itself.

She remembered her mother's last words to her. "You are going to do your homework *first* before you even *think* about doing anything else." Her mother sat on the bed, the corner of a bank statement wrinkling in her grip, bills spread all over the bedcover. Her mother had a pained, distracted expression, as if her stomach hurt. Having just finished practice, Vida settled on the corner of the bed, flute in hand.

I must have left the flute there, she thought.

"Vida," Ted said, a gentle nudge.

She nodded. Back another page was the passage that had been excruciatingly difficult to translate, the busy morning in the life of a boy waiting for his brother's ship to arrive at the Marseilles harbor. Back further, the few paragraphs about a family skiing which she had worked on with almost as much trouble. The irregular verbs exercise. Yuck.

"This one," Vida said. Grenoble, mountains, a walk in the snow, the prelude to skiing.

Ted looked at it. "Right. Just read it, as if you were reading for relaxation, then work on these verbs. You haven't memorized them yet."

Vida began. *En haut des montagnes*. She read it easily enough, only looking up one word. Then she stared into the picture of snow peaks and a road winding through a valley.

The wind on her cheeks was cold and yet she didn't feel cold anywhere else, walking the stony roadside. She saw her mother, just slightly ahead of her, standing still with her hands in her jacket pockets, gazing up at the mountains.

"Mum!" Vida called.

Her mother turned and smiled with pleasure at seeing her. In French, she said, "I hoped to see you again, Vida."

Vida wanted to cuddle her but something held her back. "Mum, are you all right?" She spoke in French as well.

Her mother's smile turned rueful and she shrugged. "I'm disappointed. I wanted to make sure you turned out OK." Then her mother frowned and turned her face back to the mountains. "I didn't leave willingly, love," she said. *Je ne suis pas parti volontiers, chérie.*

Is perfect the right tense? Is *chérie* right between mother and daughter? Vida wondered. She knew that she might cry later but at the moment she felt happy. "I know."

With a brave cheerfulness, her mother held out her hand. "Let's take a walk and name the things in French if we can remember the words."

Vida felt her mother's hand, so warm. They walked along the road more in silence than in conversation, comfortably together.

The hand held hers as she lay in a bed, covered with tightly tucked sheets and a lime-green bedcover, her cheeks cool from the window near her, beyond a view of a car park, rooftops, wintry trees.

Aunt Diane watched her face. "Vida?"

Vida started to speak but found that her throat was dry, unused. She coughed, struggling to sit up straight in the tightly made bed.

Her aunt's face changed from a quietly watchful expression to one of excitement. Fumbling with a wire, she pressed a button. "Vida?" she said again.

Vida smiled at her aunt. "Mum's disappointed," she croaked, "but she's OK."

Diane made a sudden sobbing noise and Vida lost the connecting hand.

From behind her shoulder, Ted asked, "How are you doing with that?"

Vida leaned back and closed her eyes, wrung out. "I'm so tired that I nodded off, just sitting here."

"Head down for 10 minutes, then back to work. You're going to do well, Vida, in spite of it all, but it won't happen magically."

Cradling her head in her arms on the table, Vida smiled, remembering her Mum's casual company.

After several days, Vida's routine settled. Ted proved to be a patient tutor and knew everything from geography to science (which they did in the kitchen) to French and, for Suzanne, fluent Spanish as well. Gradually, she realized that Suzanne was right about Ravinder, who never spoke but worked on his homework in solitude. No one seemed to expect him to speak. He spent a lot of time making almost perfect line drawings of things around the house. Ted never helped him with schoolwork in the same way as he did Vida or Suzanne, only praised Ravinder for his output, even though slow, patting his shoulder now and then.

In the evenings, the house seemed alive with more people than during the day. Some nights Vida found the music club, some nights a small cinema room where without fail they showed one of her favorite films. Several times she opened doors to rooms she knew and found the unexpected; once she lost the music room and found a ceramics studio which she joined in that once but never found again. Twice she played billiards with some handsome older boys in a room she had guessed wrongly was the library.

Many nights Vida, Pam, Ted, Suzanne, Ravinder, and occasionally Lon spent hours in the kitchen playing *Monopoly*, cooking, repainting furniture, learning to make patchwork bedcovers which Pam said would go to Oxfam if they were done well enough, creating Web pages or repotting house plants. Often, there were several things going on at once.

When Vida tried to retreat to her room to be alone, she found

the first five minutes or more relaxing. Then she began to feel a flurry of unwanted memories. Or she would drowse herself into a place she didn't want to inhabit. So she seldom missed an evening with others.

Vida and Ravinder did outdoor chores together. At first, Vida remained as silent as he was; there seemed little point to opening her mouth. Then, one day, as they pulled weeds from the edge of the path, she felt like talking. It seemed less risky than chattering her heart out to Lori and Suzanne, who seemed more sophisticated. Talking to Ravinder was almost as safe as talking to oneself.

"I keep having these strange dreams about being in some place like a hospital. Sometimes my auntie is there, sometimes not. You know how dreams are—all jumbled up and not making much sense. But they feel so real."

Ravinder's only response was to slow his weeding action still further as if concentrating on her words.

"I've found my mother in my French book," she continued. "Every time I translate a passage from French, I go into the photo or the drawing and my mother and I take a walk inside France. I'm learning ever so much more that way."

Ravinder stopped and studied her face. It was the first time he had looked at her so directly. "I would like to see my brother."

Vida tried not to show her surprise that he had spoken by carrying on weeding. "Where is he?" she asked.

Ravinder paused, then shrugged.

"Look in your geography homework," Vida suggested, remembering that Ravinder lingered over his geography lessons, sketching pictures in his book. "He might be a field hand in Mexico. Or in a crowded street in Johannesburg. Look at the faces. Look at the backs and make them turn around. I made a shepherd turn around once."

"Is your brother younger or older?" Vida asked.

But Ravinder withdrew, making an appearance of tugging harder than ever on the weeds.

"I've found my mother in my French book. Every time I translate a passage from French, I go into the photo or the drawing and my mother and I take a walk inside France."

More and more often, Suzanne was absent from lessons in the library, the evenings in the kitchen, and the music club, she also seemed distracted when she was present.

One of the first days that she missed lessons, Vida asked, "Where's Suzanne?"

"Spending more time with her family, I suppose," Ted said cheerfully.

"Oh." Vida accepted it but found it puzzling that Suzanne had family at all.

Then, on one of Suzanne's whole days away, Pam came into the library and suggested that they all make a little token for Suzanne's leaving party. "She can't take much with her so the more abstract it is, the more easily she can carry it."

Abstract? Vida wondered.

"Like a song," Pam said, looking at Vida.

While she dreamt, Vida was convinced that she was awake. Her Aunt Diane held her arm and together they walked down a wide ramp away from a building. In the dream, winter had already passed and there were tulips just unfurling in the otherwise bare brown soil at the edges of the concrete path.

"Do you remember my cat, Mr Socks? He knows you're coming home. He's been inspecting everything I've done to your room."

Vida laughed. "I remember when Mr Socks chewed my hair at your house. You and Mum didn't like it but it tickled."

"Yes," Diane said in a whisper. She coughed.

They reached the bottom of the steps and Vida heard a voice from behind her. "Good-bye, Vida. Good luck."

Vida turned around and saw a woman's face that had figured in a blurred way in earlier dreams. "Thank you," she said. "Good-bye."

The woman glanced at Aunt Diane then back to Vida. "The fresh air seems to be doing you some good, dear."

She walked with Diane through a car park, realizing that she had not seen a car for months. At Ted and Pam's, she had given up trying to look through the windows at the front of the door and now she couldn't even visualize where the front door might be. None of the others seemed to come and go in her presence.

Maybe they *are a dream,* Vida mused. *How funny that would be.*

Diane said little but her voice was cheerful when she said, "Here we are!" behind a little blue car. Vida realized that Diane had been carrying a bag, perhaps with Vida's things inside, which she stuffed in the trunk. Vida slid inside the car but she couldn't find the energy to cope with the seatbelt. Diane pulled the belt across and fastened it in.

"How's that, Vida? Glad to be out of there?"

Vida liked to look at Diane's face. *Her eyes are like Mum's,* she thought, *but everything else is a bit different.* Then she remembered that Diane had asked her something. She didn't know what she meant. "I don't know, Aunt," she said.

Diane shrugged, then nodded. "OK. *I'm* glad to be away, anyway. Let's go!"

No, this is the dream, Vida thought, as they drove through town. Cars, people walking along the pavement, the supermarket, the park,

trees in bud, grass greening up, a watery blue sky with white clouds on the horizon. Her eyes grew tired of moving back and forth, trying to fix on objects as they drove past. Then she didn't want to look any longer, feeling an old sick pain around her stomach as she remembered her old life, her stepfather. The flute.

Even though she wanted to thank Diane for taking her for a drive, she couldn't speak. She closed her eyes and felt the motion of the car, the sun shining through the windshield onto her cheeks. The car paused at a busy intersection.

Vida opened her eyes and saw two boys skateboard around the corner, their wheels making a rumbling ch-ch-ch as they passed over the cracks in the concrete. One of the skateboarders balked and tipped, catching himself deftly before falling over. Then he set off again, singing out, "Go, go, go!"

Diane pulled into the traffic circle, leaving the boys behind.

Vida closed her eyes again, mentally replaying the rhythm and the three-note song she had just heard. Perfect beginning for Suzanne's song. A song she had just heard. Perfect beginning for Suzanne's song. A song for going outside. Go, go, go!

"I can't use my flute, though," she said aloud.

She sensed Diane turning her head to look at her. "Your flute?"

"It's gone. That bastard wrecked it. That bastard got it all bloody."

"It has possibilities." The blues singer's voice rang out in the music room, empty but for her and Vida. They sat on the piano bench together where Vida had picked out the first line of Suzanne's song. "But you've got a bit of music theory to learn first to know how to manage the whole song."

"Music theory," Vida said with disappointment. "They don't do that for pop songs, do they?"

The singer coughed out a big alto smoker's laugh. "Come on, kid, it's not that hard. You know a lot of it just by instinct anyway. Sometimes it sounds good, sometimes it jangles, sometimes it's churpy, sometimes it's sad." She sang the last phrase in a minor key, her pitch falling in the spilled red wine of her voice.

Disheartened, her song fading, Vida frowned.

"And here's your flute," the blues singer said.

Vida hadn't noticed the flute case while she had been sitting there, but the blues singer pulled it down to her lap and clicked it open.

It was *her* flute. Clean, polished, and neat in its red velvety space. She recognized the sheen of its surface, the worn places.

She recoiled, standing up and backing away from the piano, the singer, the flute.

The blues singer watched Vida, tidying one side of her long black hair behind her ear. "It's something you must do. You have to play again or you'll be trapped forever." She picked it up from its case, fitted the halves together expertly, and held it out to Vida. "Just hold it."

"No." Vida held her hands up against it.

The broken flute began to ooze blood around the bent keys, down the jagged end.

Vida looked at the blues singer but now her stepfather held the flute. "Do your damn practice, little madam. I'm sick of paying for your lessons when you're too bloody busy to practice."

The bright, pale orange room smelled of ironing. The cat scrambled out of Vida's lap. Diane unplugged the iron and crossed to where Vida sat on the sofa. She held her awkwardly, making soothing noises.

It's real, Vida thought, no matter where I am, it's inside me.

She woke in the dark in the small, safe room. Bed, table, mullioned windows gleaming cold white with a distorted moon.

"Who's there?" She sat up suddenly.

Ravinder sat on the chair by her table. He seemed to have been watching her sleep, his dark eyes steadily fixed on her through his glasses.

"What are you doing here?"

"I can't find my brother," he said. "I've looked in all the pictures in my books."

For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Vida trying to shake off what she felt had recently happened in the music room.

"Were you dreaming?" he finally asked.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Because when I'm here, I feel normal, strong, and clear-headed. When I'm with my Aunt Diane, I feel confused. Can't work out what's going on. You know how in dreams you feel like your muscles have turned to sand? You're too tired or stupefied to move? It feels like that. But the colors... the smells... " She rubbed her forehead. "It's confusing."

Ravinder watched her in the darkness.

"But where *are we*?" Vida asked. It was a question she had been afraid to ask from the first moment when she crossed the street and found refuge, in case her curiosity sounded like ingratitude and made everything vanish.

Ravinder made a strange sound, a sudden intake of breath.

"Do you have those dreams?"

"I make myself wake up," he said in a tight voice. "I don't like the dream place." Then Vida realized that Ravinder was weeping.

"Where did you last see your brother?" she asked.

"He was with me when ... something happened."

Again they were silent. Ravinder breathed shallowly and rapidly.

"Do you think he's dead?" Vida asked.

"I don't think so."

"My mother is dead. That's why she's only in the photos. I was doing French when she died. Maybe that's why she got stuck there, coming to look for me or something."

After a long pause, he said, "I didn't know that. I'm sorry, Vida."

"Maybe your brother's in the dream place," she suggested. "I think that's where we keep the relations. Even their cats."

Ravinder said nothing. Chilly, Vida propped up her pillow and pulled the covers back over her shoulders.

"I don't want to dream," he said.

"Come here and hold my hand. It makes me feel better to have someone hold my hand."

"I don't know how to do that," Ravinder said in a tone that let her know he didn't want to learn, either.

"I'm not sleepy now," Vida said. She leaned over the side of the bed and picked up her dressing gown from the floor. "Let's go down to the kitchen."

When Pam arrived in the kitchen hours later, Vida gathered that she was astonished to see them chattering at the table, eating sweet, spicy rice while Ravinder tried to draw her portrait. As faultless as he was at drawing inanimate objects, he had never drawn people before and the first attempts hardly looked like a face at all but a series of lines, as if scanned by a machine.

But by the time the sun came up, he had found Vida's eyes and a smile.

Both Ted and Pam sat across the table in silent preoccupation with the newspaper as if waiting, while Vida ate breakfast, giving her a distinct feeling that some sort of discipline was in the air. Pondering over her daydreaming approach to her studies, her uniquely carefree attitude toward Ravinder, and her lack of initiative in help with a house that seemed nearly self-cleaning, she felt nervous.

She pushed away the remaining cornflakes and glanced up at Pam. Nonchalantly folding the newspaper and tossing it down the table, Ted smiled at her with encouragement. "Vida, we think it's time to discuss a few things with you."

"Like what?" Vida couldn't help but hear an echo of the sullen tone she used to have when responding to her stepfather

"First of all, you've done so well here," Ted said "You've been a level-headed, hard-working addition to the group from the first day, just as we would have expected We can easily understand why your mother used to rely on you and why your teachers never suspected that things weren't right at home "

Vida shrugged

"We're really pleased with your friendship with Ravinder," Pam said. "We knew he would come out of his depression eventually but you've been a great boost to him "

Vida almost smiled but there was too much praise to be taken with anything other than caution

"There's someone else who needs you as well," Pam said.

"Who's that?"

"Your Aunt Diane."

"Oh " Vida felt a strange, heavy sensation, as if they had been peering into her head at night while she dreamt of moments with Diane, sometimes long, uncomfortable dreams, often tedious and wearing, centered on her bedroom or the sofa in the living room. This conversation broke a recent dream of her aunt weeping.

"She's become so discouraged "

How did Pam know all this? Vida wondered

"We would like you to stay with her for two or three days without coming back Perhaps you could get her to take you somewhere you both enjoy," Ted suggested.

Vida suddenly remembered that she hadn't made a gift for Suzanne's going-away, having given up the song after the flute's appearance in the music room. Before she could mention it, Pam said, "Suzanne is gone You may think you didn't give her anything but Suzanne knows how you respected her That mattered a lot. When you return, there might be a new person here "

Vida laughed, shaking her head. "You can read my mind, can't you?"

Pam and Ted both smiled Ted said, "It's all around us Vida. Hard not to."

"You know how in dreams you feel like your muscles have turned to sand? You're too tired or stupefied to move? It feels like that. But the colors ... the smells ..."

Late spring warmth on white blossom, orange sherbet on the leaves of lemon trees, two wicker chairs on the cropped grass—one for Vida, one for Diane, and three orange-streaked yellow tulips against the wooden fence

"Oh, what a lovely day," Diane said sensually, stretching her legs out, lifting her face to the sun.

Sometimes, Diane reminded Vida of her mother but, at the moment, she seemed more like a sister to Vida than an aunt, young and still passionate. She had been married briefly, but Vida couldn't even remember her ex-husband's face now Her mother had complained about Diane's irresponsible life, hardly keeping a boyfriend or a job for longer than a few months She was attractive, lively, and good natured

Vida had just been laughing at her joke about the Englishman, the Scot, and the Welshman.

"Hey, Vida, do you fancy going to the cinema this evening? And then pizza afterwards?"

"Oh!"

"It's great to see you smiling "

Vida suddenly thought of Ravinder with the guilt of a forgetful friend How long had she been away? Five days? A week? Somehow, it was easier this time, easier to pay attention, easier to do physical things, easier to fall into bed at night and sleep dreamlessly When Diane was elsewhere, she watched people, cars, dogs, and birds through the window, an endless display of unexpected detail and behavior that ordinary dreams couldn't conjure

"This is real," Vida said "This is the real side, isn't it?"

Diane tilted her head "Sorry?"

Vida hesitated. If I talk about it, I will never go back It will shut the door "What film are we going to see?" she asked

When she woke, Ravinder sat in the chair by her bed as he had on that first night. But a candle burned on the table by her school books, lighting the room with a flickering glow

"Hello," she said

"I've been waiting for you. They say you will be leaving soon. I didn't want to miss you "

Vida didn't know what to say She didn't want to apologize for wanting to return to Diane, to school, to the endless possibilities of the other side

"I found my brother," Ravinder said His voice sounded different, excited "He was in the dreams, as you said I'm going to try to stay with him as much as possible now."

Vida almost spoke but didn't She saw a smile on Ravinder's face.

"Before you go, I want to give you something "

"But I haven't—"

"You gave me my brother," Ravinder said, unwrapping something from a black cloth

It was a flute Not her own flute, but one made of gold Or was it the candlelight which gave it the yellow cast? A flute. A warm, clean, safe flute For music and not death.

Ravinder held it out to her

After a long hesitation, she reached out to touch it ❧

SEVEN BROTHERS

CRUEL

By David Barr Kirtley
Illustration by Kyle Anderson and Myunghee Lee

What you see isn't always what you get. Sometimes it's much better; sometimes much, much worse.

I

[redacted] kitchen, behind a great clay oven.

The second time was on the [redacted]. Through the window slats they could see patches of yellow and orange field broken by winding rivers, stretching below them.

The third time was in the courtyard, his back pressed tight against the stone well, while down in the darkness the old, warped wooden bucket, hanging by a [redacted], knocked from [redacted] sides, knock-knock.

Galan was in love with [redacted]. Her face was young and bright, her hair straight and black. She [redacted] world.

[redacted] shoulder toward the keep, where her brothers were training. "[redacted]," Her seven brothers. "They're horrible [redacted] and they torment me. I'm nothing to them."

Galan followed her gaze, back to the keep.

He'd been out here a long time. He didn't [redacted], but [redacted] missed.

"All right," [redacted] the stables.

"Yes," he said, [redacted].

He hurried across the yard. The fortress [redacted] creeping vines grew out of the grime between the blue-black stones, and clusters of crows perched at odd angles along the rocky battlements like [redacted] high arch.

In the great hall, Sarei's brothers sat together in the light of the hearth. Across the table from them sat Galan's own company, 10 men dressed in hard, brown leather, sprawled along a bench. Galan slipped in with them on the end.

Balthus was the oldest brother, and Douglas was the loudest, but they all looked the same: pale skin and black hair, except the twins, who were blond. Vassals, they were obligated to give comfort to knights—even Galan and his company, young and poor—but they didn't like it. It had been a week, and they wanted the guests gone. But leaving here would mean leaving Sarei.

Galan noticed the brother named Douglas watching him.

"You've never told me," Douglas said, smoothing his dark, drooping mustache. "Who's the best soldier in this bold company?" There was a mocking edge to his voice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Galan saw Sarei, carrying a heavy bucket, stop on the stairs. He smiled thinly. "I am."

From down the table, one of his company gave an appreciative laugh. "It's true."

Douglas ignored that. "You're just a boy."

"But I'm strong," Galan said, "and fast. And deadly with a sword."

And I train constantly, he thought, with sword, and lance, and quarterstaff. I train until the master-at-arms retires bruised and weeping, and my practice sword shatters against its target, and the blood runs red down my wrist from a dozen cracked, dark blisters. I train through the night while the white stars wheel, until the rooster crows at the light. Because I dream of a lady to rescue, and love. A lady to fall against my chest and whisper: My brave knight, my love.

A lady like Sarei. He glanced at her there on the stairs. Her eldest brother, Balthus, noticed his gaze and turned to look. Sarei fled up the steps.

"Well then," Douglas said, leaning back in his seat and smiling, "I'm glad I've never faced *you* in battle."

Some of the brothers snickered.

Galan scowled at them. "You *should* be glad. Because I'd kill you."

They quickly fell silent.

Galan leaned forward and glared. "Because I never lose," he told them. "Never."

After supper, he met Sarei out behind the stables. The horses stamped and snorted. Clumps of wet straw spilled out of the bales and across the dirt.

Her face was murky in the twilight. There was awe in her voice. "Is that true what you said tonight? About sword fighting?"

"Yes."

"You could take me away, then," she said excited. "You could protect me." She shivered. "I hate it here. They're terrible to me here, they never let me leave. I'd do anything to get away. I'd leave tonight, if you'd take me."

"Where would you go?"

"With you," she said. "Back to your hall, to meet your lady mother. We'd marry and I'd stay with you forever."

Away in the night, Galan thought, the two of them—because he couldn't involve his company in this. But the two of them could ride fast, be back to his own lands within a few weeks, and married. "Your brothers might come after us."

He wondered how fast they could follow, and how well they could fight, and how badly they would want her back. She was their sister, after all, and there were seven of them. Seven against one.

She said, "Are you afraid of them?"

He stared at her, at her flushed cheeks and desperate eyes. She needed to be rescued from all this, he knew. And what was it for, the hard hours with sword and lance, the daydreams, the sad longings, if not for this?

"No," he told her. "I'm not afraid."

They went about the fortress, gathered some belongings, then stole back to the stables. Sarei's mount was a milk-white steed, and his a dapple-gray.

They rode off quietly into the night.

The morning sun shone bright across the dewed, yellow grass. Galan and Sarei rode down a shallow valley. They splashed across a rocky stream, then up toward a line of trees on the far bank. The sky was huge and pale blue above them. It echoed the sound of hoofbeats.

At the next rise they paused by the edge of the forest, to look back. A rider on a white and brown horse came over the hill behind them.

"My eldest brother," Sarei said. "Balthus."

They spurred their mounts and fled through the thin trees, trampling the under growth, which snapped and fell away beneath them. In a great, gold meadow, ringed with oaks, Galan wheeled his horse. "Go ahead," he shouted. "I'll meet you." Sarei's eyes were huge and dark with concern, but she rode on.

Galan tossed back his cloak and drew his sword. Sunlight shone through the green branches all around, dappling the trunks of trees. To be alive, he thought, in the forest, in love, with a sword in your hand, and a foe to face. His horse took several anxious steps back as the rider burst into the clearing.

"Villain!" Balthus reined his steed. "Kidnapper!" His shoulders were wide, his jaw was broad, and his eyes were dark.

Galan urged his horse on. It trotted forward. "Sarei wants to leave. She wants to come with me."

"She's a young girl. She doesn't know what she wants."

"I'll marry her."

"Liar. You'll dishonor her. And her family. And her name. Where is she?"

Galan motioned with his head. "Back there."

"Then move." Balthus drew his sword. "Or I'll ride over you."

"Go to her," Galan shouted. "If you can."

Balthus surged forward, sword high. He beat at Galan's head with overhead blows. Galan parried. The horses passed and circled. Their hooves tore clods from the ground. They snorted, misty breath glistening in the morning air.

Balthus backed away, then charged again. Galan scampered aside. Their swords met, clanking in unsteady rhythm as the mounts swayed. Galan slashed. Balthus pulled warily out of range, hesitated a moment, then attacked again.

Galan met the man's sword and swept it aside, pressing both their blades down against the mane of Balthus's horse. The mounts stumbled close, the two men were almost eye to eye. Galan yanked his sword free and smashed the pommel into Balthus's face.

Balthus fell to the rough ground. His horse turned, wary and confused, casting its great mane all about. Balthus gasped and held up his arms as the horse wheeled, and one of its heavy hooves came down, crushing his head.

The horse stood there, staring at Galan. Anxious, it raised and lowered its hooves, as if its feet were stuck in swampy ground, mashing great clefts in the soft body beneath it.

Galan glanced back toward the forest. Sarei sat on her white steed, just inside the trees, watching. That was the last thing he wanted.

Balthus's horse bolted away, leaving two uneven tracks of bloody prints in the ground, in the wake of its red hooves. Galan rode over to where Sarei was waiting. "I told you to go on ahead."

She said quietly, "I wanted to see."

He thought she might blame him, be angry and yell, or else fall weeping into his arms. She didn't. She simply sat there, still and silent, staring raptly at the lumpy mess that had once been a brother.

"Come on." Galan took her by the arm. "Let's go."

They rode away. Black-winged crows dropped out of the branches all around, settling lightly over the body, like autumn leaves.

"He was never strong," Sarei said. "Balthus. The others are more dangerous."

Galan had slain their eldest brother. They would all come for certain now, and follow far, over his own borders if they had to. There would be no more talk.

He and Sarei followed a winding path through stony fields. Heavy boulders loomed over them, green with lichen, sprawled in the matted grass like eggs in a nest.

"We'll make for the Briars," Galan said "We'll have to dismount and lead the horses, but so will they It'll be harder to follow

At noon they crested a hill Below, the dark Briars began, stretching far to the horizon—looping branches, thick as a man's arm, high as a castle wall, with wicked thorns Galan was halfway down the hill when he heard hoofbeats

"Go," he shouted "Hide in the Briars. I mean it"

But Saren hung back, just ahead of him. "It's Sebal," she said, when she saw the rider The man was skinny, with short-cropped hair, and his face was gaunt, but handsome

Galan met him. They fought among the boulders, swords loud, horses picking careful footsteps in the rocky ground Sebal tired quickly He wheeled, to put some distance between them, but Galan pursued, forcing him back against a tall boulder that jutted steeply out. Sebal parried blow after blow, just in time to keep Galan's blade away from his knee, his shoulder, his throat

Then Galan reared his horse, and it leapt up, roaring, hooves wheeling in the air

Sebal bolted backward As the boulder's shadow fell across his face, he turned, in time to see it smash into his cheek His body fell broken, twisted, like a spider's web, over the damp rocks

Saren laughed and cheered. "You did it! I knew you would " She applauded, then clasped her hands and squeezed them "You got him."

Galan rode back to her, wiping grime from his brow with the back of his glove. Her pure glee angered him. "He was your brother Show some respect."

Her smile fell away. "He was wicked He *deserved* to die, for what he did to me " There were tears in her eyes Angrily, she spurred her horse and rode off ahead of him

Galan caught her quickly. "I'm sorry," he said, riding alongside her

They entered the Briars

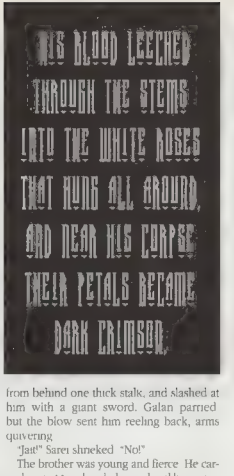
Branches arched above, only a few patches of sky shone through. In some places the thorns pressed tight all around them, and they crouched and covered their faces, pulling the horses after them. Other areas were open, white mist drifting over the level ground

And there were roses. Soft, white roses grew all up and down the vines, sometimes masking sharp thorns. The dirt was spotted with petals

Galan heard twigs snap, from near or far, it was hard to tell Mist was everywhere Out in the distance, the branches turned vague and ghostly, and everything beyond them was white. He kept his sword in his hand

They came to a spot with vines thick as tree trunks, and thorns long as daggers

As Galan bent to rest someone ran out



from behind one thick stalk, and slashed at him with a giant sword. Galan parried but the blow sent him reeling back, arms quivering

"Jait!" Saren shrieked "No!"

The brother was young and fierce He carried a great two-handed sword and he swung it like a hammer Galan blocked, teeth ringing He blocked again And once more. His sword cracked

The top half of the blade dropped and stuck in the dry ground. He hurled the handle at Jait's eye, but the boy turned aside, and the broken sword spun harmlessly over his shoulder Galan fled

Jait followed, hacking back and forth with his enormous sword Galan crouched low and scrambled as branches, vines, and thorns fell away behind him Then he turned, back pressed against a thick stalk and he watched as the great sword came hurtling toward his neck

He dropped The blade buried itself six inches into the wood above his head Jait tugged at the handle, violently, but the sword was lodged Galan leapt forward, seizing the boy by the shirtfront and running him back against the brambles. A giant thorn burst black and oozing through Jait's chest

Galan gasped and fell away, and the boy hung there, his dangling toes barely brushing the ground, impaled through the heart on one great thorn

The vines drank him greedily His blood leeched through the stems into the white roses that hung all around, and near his corpse their petals became dark crimson, and farther away they turned bright scarlet

Saren laughed. "Look at it. It's beautiful She dashed forward and tore a rose from near her dead brother's elbow She pinned it to her dress

Galan watched, horrified Later, he picked his way over to the trunk where Jait's sword hung, buried in the wood. He set his foot against the stalk, and ripped the heavy weapon free

"Can you fight with that thing?" Saren asked "I can fight with anything," he said wearily She smiled

That night, as they lay on his cloak against the hard ground, Saren slipped out of her dress. She tore hungrily at his belt and climbed on top of him. As she swayed there, lowering herself down onto him, then up, then down again, she threw back her head and screamed out loud in the night And when she looked at him, her eyes were aflame with lust and desire, with terrible pleasure

Like when she watched her brothers die

Galan had doubts He had dreamed of a lady who would love his courage, but hate bloodshed. She might weep when men died, but he could be strong for her, take her into his arms, and comfort her. Saren did not weep

Would it be better if she did? he asked himself angrily. Would that be better?

Yes, a voice inside him replied Better if she wept Better if she bore in it brave silence Better even if she hated him for it, shouted and hit him

Anything would be better than this—to see her laugh at the murder, to see her eyes light with joy at each new revenge on her own brothers It was wrong, no matter what they had done to deserve it

The earth turned soft and muddy along the bank of a slow, brown river Galan and Saren beat a path up and down the shore, looking for a place to cross Instead they found Douglas, kneeling by the water His horse plodded through the shallows, lapping thirstily at the river

"Just turn and go," Galan said, holding up the great sword in warning "I'll let you live."

Saren was incredulous. "What?"

Douglas rose, wiping water from his long mustache. He glanced at Saren, scowled, and then his eyes fixed on Galan's weapon "That's Jait's sword," he said. "My brother."

Galan began to speak, but his words were drowned out by the hiss of steel as Douglas drew his blade "You said you'd kill me if we fought." Douglas stalked forward, arm extended, the tip of his sword pointed at Galan's chest. "Let's find out"

Galan inched forward, sword raised in a guard position "Be careful," Saren told him "He's dangerous."

Douglas attacked, and Galan met him cautiously, adjusting to the heft of his new weapon, feeling out the man's strengths After several minutes, Galan knew he was better

Then he attacked, pushing forward with fierce, clean strokes, driving Douglas back into the river. The muddy water splashed about the man's ankles and shins as he retreated. Galan rushed in, and the water seeped through his boots, squishing between his toes. He had the advantage now. Douglas was in up to his knees, struggling to move his feet.

As Galan shuffled forward, his toe smacked painfully into something under the water. His knee buckled and he almost fell. A loop of tree root, it felt like. He struggled to keep the strain off his face, but Douglas, too busy defending, didn't notice. Galan retreated then, maneuvering carefully around the root.

Douglas came forward. His feet snagged beneath the water and he tumbled down, splashing into the river. His sword spun away, lost in the slow current. He rolled onto his back, sputtering, but Galan was already there, pressing the tip of his great sword into the man's throat.

"Yield," Galan ordered.

On the shore, Sarei gasped. "You're going to spare him? *Him*?"

"Kill me," Douglas spat. "Boy."

"Do it! Kill him," Sarei splashed out into the water, her dress hanging damp around her knees. "You killed Balthus, who could be honorable, and Jat, who could be dutiful, and Sebal, who was sometimes merry. And you're going to spare *him*? But he's wretched. He's the worst of them all."

Galan frowned, trying to block her out. "I warn you," he told Douglas. "Yield."

"Kill me," Douglas said. "Do it, you worthless, craven, cowardly kidnapper. Villain. You bastard, do it."

"Do it," Sarei screamed.

"Fine!" Fury overtook Galan. He raised his sword.

"My brothers will avenge me," Douglas said, then the blade came down, pushing him under. The river swallowed his face. Clouds of mud billowed out from under his body, mixed with the blood, floating up and churning on the surface on the water.

Later, Galan regretted it. They found a crossing, and traveled for a time in silence. Finally, Sarei spoke. "It's good that you killed him. He deserved it. He was truly terrible. Worse than the others, even."

Galan's voice was hoarse. "What did he do to you?" He didn't want to upset her, but he had to know.

Sarei lowered her head and looked away. "He used to sneak into my room at night," she said, "and cut off my hair." She was seething, furious. "One time he called me a whore. In front of everyone."

Galan stared.

"One time," Sarei added, "a knight named Sir Jamie of the Blue Fist came to visit us. He wanted me to travel with him, to take me to the fairs. It would have been wonderful. But Douglas chased him off with an axe and he never came back."

And that was why she hated them, why she wanted to watch them die. Childish pranks, name calling. Galan said, "Jamie of the Blue Fist?"

"Yes."

"But." He was startled. "Sir Jamie is a notorious—"

"What?"

"A notorious—" Galan struggled for words. "... well, a lecher." Any man would chase Jamie away from a young sister.

Sarei shrugged. "It didn't matter to me." She sighed. "I didn't care who he was. I would've gone with anyone, really, if they'd have taken me away from there."

Anyone. Galan thought miserably.

She looked at him, and told him, with utter sincerity, "I hated it there."

Galan watched the sky. Through the enclosing brambles, the bright clouds seemed far away, and free. And he was with Sarei.

They had crossed almost to the far side of the Briars, beyond were open fields. Galan was struck by a wild impulse to bolt at the first sight of unbroken grass, to gallop away, leaving Sarei and her damned brothers far behind. Or maybe, he thought sourly, he could just take her back.

But it was impossible, all of it. What would people say? Galan the knight had taken a young girl from her home, spent a night with her in the forest, killed four of her brothers—maybe more, if his rotten luck held—and then left her. He would be dishonored forever.

Galan clenched his fists and rubbed his temples hard. There was nothing to do but go through with it. Take her home and marry her. He hoped they would encounter no more brothers.

"There are only three of them now," Sarei said. "The twins, Aron and Adom, and my youngest brother, Whit. The twins always fight together, they're deadly. Much worse than the ones you killed, and Whit is a master swordsman."

It sounded grim, Galan thought, but he had defeated them all so far.

The air turned cold, and snow fell. Flakes drifted down and clung to the tops of thorns. Galan could see out beyond the brambles now and the dry grasses were tinged with white. A coal-colored wisp of smoke, from a cook fire, smeared the gray clouds, but there was nowhere else to go except back into the Briars, so he pushed forward.

Aron and Adom had camped at the top of a low hill. They came down a winding dirt trail, swords drawn. Snow was sprinkled through their blond hair and across their shoulders.

"I don't want to fight you," Galan told them.

They watched him with two identical faces, two identical angry faces. They exchanged a dubious look, then advanced.

Galan expected them to split up, to circle him and attack from opposite directions, but they didn't. They stood shoulder to shoulder and came at him with jerking thrusts. He retreated, working his way from side to side, parrying in wide horizontal sweeps, knocking aside the tips of their swords. They were not very skilled.

But there *were* two of them, and they did spread apart, finally, and then one got the idea to circle behind him.

Galan fought, swinging his body back and forth, slapping aside attacks first in front, then behind, now in front again. The twins closed in slowly, pressing him.

Then they rushed, by chance at the same moment. One raised a sword above his head, the other lunged straight forward. Galan spun away, and one man skewered his brother through the gut.

The twins stared at each other, eye to eye—like a single face watching itself in a glassy mirror—identically shocked, with blood and death between them. The dying one sank away, exhaling frost, sliding off the end of his brother's sword.

Galan swept forward and battered the other with heavy strokes, beating him back. The man toppled to the ground. His two pale wrists fell across an ice-crusted log, like over a butcher's block. Galan raised his sword up high and brought it down. Two white hands, and the sword they held, dropped away. There was blood on the snow. Galan lifted his weapon to strike again.

"Please," the man begged, holding up the weeping stumps that had been his hands. "Mercy."

Galan hesitated. Sarei came running through the snow. "Kill him! Do it."

The man held Galan with his eyes. "She hates us. She was always sad and angry, and I don't know why. We loved her."

"Liar!" Sarei was livid. "How can you even say that?"

Galan lowered his sword.

She was shocked. "What are you doing?"

"We're leaving," he said. "Now."

Her eyes filled with tears. "But—but I hate him. I hate him so much. I've wanted so long for this."

Galan jammed the sword into the snow. Stuck in the earth like that, the hilt came almost to Sarei's shoulders. He gestured at it. "You want him dead?" he said. "You do it."

Sarei's face drained of color. "What?"

"You heard me." Galan glared at her with proud fury. "It's not so easy when you have to look them in the eye."

Her lower lip trembled. "But I'm not." She glanced at her brother. "I mean, I can't—"

"Then let's go," Galan said, turning away.

"Fine." Sarei's face was set in a stubborn scowl.

And as Galan watched, she ripped the

sword free, set her feet apart in the snow, and hacked her brother's head off

He had to get away. She had seemed angry, uncaring, keeping Jait's bloody rose. But this—

This was unreasoning. Bloodthirsty. Like I was? he wondered. Before I saw it in her? Sarei was happy while he was helping her, but with her brothers gone? Where would her anger turn?

You lied to me," he said. "Aron and Adom. You said they were deadly. They weren't. They were stabbing each other back there."

Sarei was quiet a long time. "I didn't want you to be too confident, let your guard down. I was afraid—" She chewed her lip a while, glanced at the clouds. She continued more candidly, "I wanted no mercy. I wanted them to see your full wrath. For all the years they were cruel to me." Her eyes bore into him. "You understand, don't you? Why I said those things?"

The truth." Galan insisted.

"The truth." Sarei puckered her lips, as if the word tasted bad. She sighed heavily, fidgeting. "Balthus was the strongest. When you killed him I knew we could make it. Jait was fierce but clumsy. The others were clods. What's worst of all, he can barely keep hold of a sword."

Galan didn't know whether to laugh or cry. They rode on unhurried. They were home free now.

But he would never be free, of her.

Unless—

Unless he was defeated by Whit. Galan smiled, in spite of himself. If Whit was victorious, and took Sarei home, there would be no dishonor in that. Galan had won six straight battles for his lady, no one could blame him for failing the last. He would lose glory, certainly, but glory could be won back later, on the battlefield.

It would be possible, if Whit was inept. Give him an opening, take a weak blow to the shoulder, pretend to be wounded, stumble off into the trees. Let him grab Sarei. And lose to a younger boy who could barely wield a sword. The thought made Galan grit his teeth. But it was the only way.

They saw Whit's horse the next afternoon in the valley behind them, just a black dot. It had taken the boy forever to catch them. The older brothers must have ridden off and left him days ago.

Are you going to face him?" Sarei prodded.

"If I have to." Galan didn't want to seem too eager. A sudden change might make her suspicious, but he did ride slowly, and delayed at every opportunity.

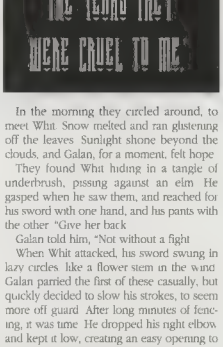
They spotted Whit again and again, across wide fields, trailing, but never gaining. By the fourth day, Galan was impatient. They had slowed practically to a walk, and still Whit did not gain.

And never would. Galan realized. Whit had no intention of catching them, of dying like his brothers. He would return home, defeated, claiming truthfully that he had pursued Galan over many leagues, but had not overtaken him.

Galan had seen Whit only a few times, at the fortress, but could picture him clearly now—chubby, with his damned pale, pasty face, trotting back there, slouched in his saddle, telling himself he was doing all he could under the circumstances.

On the fifth night, by the light of the fire Galan told Sarei, "I'm going to go back and face him. He's getting closer." That wasn't true. "He might sneak up in the night." Galan was more worried about Whit sneaking *off* in the night.

"Yes," Sarei said, and her eyes glittered at the suggestion of a brother's death.



In the morning they circled around, to meet Whit. Snow melted and ran glistening off the leaves. Sunlight shone beyond the clouds, and Galan, for a moment, felt hope.

They found Whit hiding in a tangle of underbrush, pissing against an elm. He gasped when he saw them, and reached for his sword with one hand, and his pants with the other. "Give her back."

Galan told him, "Not without a fight."

When Whit attacked, his sword swung in lazy circles, like a flower stem in the wind. Galan parried the first of these casually, but quickly decided to slow his strokes, to seem more off guard. After long minutes of fencing, it was time. He dropped his right elbow, and kept it low, creating an easy opening to his left shoulder. Whit didn't take it.

They fought on. Galan lowered his guard even more, but Whit kept slashing at waist level. Did the boy think it was a trick? But no. Whit was just oblivious to the opening, to any opening. Galan grimaced. That made things difficult.

If Galan couldn't anticipate the attack, it would be hard to roll with it. And Whit's attacks *were* unpredictable. Most would miss even if Galan stood still. Catching a glancing blow would not be easy.

Finally, Galan saw a chance. He leapt forward, pretending to stumble, and caught the tip of Whit's sword. But the blow was stronger than he'd judged. It ripped through his shoulder and drew a red gouge across his chest. His scream was real.

Galan fled through the forest, dragging his sword behind him, one hand held over his wound. Blood seeped between his fingers, darkening his leather glove. He stumbled over ferns, then stopped, leaning against a thin sapling. Behind him, voices.

"Sarei. Come with me. Now."

"I won't. He's still alive."

"Are you crazy? Come on, let's get out of here. Sarei, please."

"He killed your brothers. Whit, and you run away? Are you so afraid of him? Of a wounded man?" *Was* afraid, clearly. He hesitated a long time. But Sarei's shaming had gotten to him. Like it got to me, Galan remembered.

Whit groaned unhappily. Then he came, picking his way through the undergrowth, cutting it away with his sword. Galan fled deeper. He pushed through a leafy tangle and came out at the base of a jagged, rocky wall. He couldn't scale it, not bleeding, and there was nowhere else to go. He slumped against a shattered boulder, his sword hanging from his fingers, and he stared at the white sky. He thought of dying, out here. He couldn't let it happen. Not like this. He lay still.

Through slitted lids he watched Whit's cautious approach. I'm dead!. he wanted to scream, go back and tell her. Tell her you think I'm dead.

But Whit inched closer, sword held ready. Forgive me, Galan thought. I had no choice. She gave me no choice. It's him or me now. No choice.

Whit inhaled sharply and raised his sword high. Galan rolled forward, wrapping his left arm around the boy's ankles, dragging the great sword across the back of Whit's knees, slicing the tendons. The boy collapsed and lay thrashing, screaming into the dirt, legs spasming.

Galan crawled on top of him and planted the sword through the back of Whit's neck. It passed out his throat and stuck in the ground. Galan gasped and sobbed.

He grappled unsteadily with his sword, which stood anchored there, and used it to pull himself to his feet. Sarei came running. She fell into Galan's arms, smothering her breasts painfully against his wounded chest. "My brave knight," she breathed. "My love. I knew you'd beat him. I knew you would."

Galan sighed. "I never lose," he told her sadly. "Never."

MOIRA

By Lois Tilton · Illustration by Gary Lippincott

Came sunset, when Helios drove his chariot into the western lands beyond the ocean, the home of Night and Death. In the dying light the high walls of Troy glowed red, as if the city were burning.

All day the armies had struggled for possession of Patroklos's naked corpse, no man willing to give ground, to abandon the body. At last with nightfall the Trojans disengaged from their lethal embrace with the enemy, leaving the Achaians to carry the dead man back to their black-hulled ships. There Achilles, son of Peleus vowed to take Trojan lives in revenge for Patroklos, and above all the life of his killer, man-slaying Hektor, Priam's son.

Exhausted from the work of battle, the Trojans withdrew to their camp by the banks of the Simoeis, where they lowered their heavy shields to the ground and took off their helmets, the bronze dulled with the dust of the battlefield, the horsehair plumes draggled. Sweat had carved runnels through the grime and blood caked on their faces. Servants brought them wine and water to quench their thirst, yet they did not remove the rest of their armor, not until they had taken counsel.

First spoke Polydamas, advising retreat behind Troy's high walls rather than face the vengeful wrath of Achilles on the open plain. "None of us can face him in battle! We are only mortal men, not gods."

But Hektor had triumphed that day, killing Patroklos and taking his armor as his prize. The power of the gods had been in Priam's son, and he felt himself invincible. In reply to Polydamas he raised high the helmet he had stripped from Patroklos's corpse, the high crested helmet Achilles had given his companion to wear into the battle where he was doomed to die. "Here is how much I fear Achilles and his wrath! Let him come and try to take it back! Today my spear drank Patroklos's blood, tomorrow it may find Achilles. The son of Peleus will not be the first man born of the gods to be brought down by a mortal's hand!"

In trying to avoid your fate you may end up rushing headlong into its arms. This may not always be a bad thing.

The Trojans cheered his words and there was no more talk of retreat to the safety of their walls. They washed off the grime and blood of battle and made sacrifice to the gods in thanks for their victory that day. Yet when they had wrapped themselves in their cloaks to sleep beneath the sight of the stars the gold-gifted courage began

"Once, I might have turned my back on

to ebb from Hektor's heart, and Death suddenly seemed so close he could almost feel the cold breath on the back of his neck. So had Patroklos foretold it, in his last words. *Your life will not be long now after mine. Already I see Death and Fate behind you, closing in. I see you falling.*

Now Hektor's thoughts turned to white-armed Andromache, his wife, mother of his young son. She was waiting for him behind the high walls of Troy, waiting for him to return from battle. How it had torn his heart to leave her pleading with him to hold himself back from the fighting, to guard his life! But he was Troy's champion, the city's defender. If he fell, if he failed, who could stand in his place? Who else among the Trojans could do battle against the murderous rage of Achilles?

So with Night as his witness, he prayed to Zeus, the father of men and gods: "Today on the battlefield I felt your power in me and knew there was no man living I could not defeat in combat while I fought with the strength of a god. Even Patroklos, wearing the armor of Achilles, fell to my spear. Even Achilles himself will fall if you decree his death. But if this is not your divine will, if my fate is to die in this war, then I would rather die at the bloody hand of Achilles than live to see my wife and son borne off into bitter slavery while my city burns. This is all I ask: Only let my son live to grow to manhood, to defend the city after me, and I will go willingly down to Hades' dark realm without regret for the loss of my own life."

So Hektor prayed.

And the waters of Simoeis flowed past him to the sea, near the shore where Peleus's son Achilles wept and raged over the body of Patroklos his companion. While captive women washed the clotted blood from the dead man's wounds, Achilles, with his head covered in ashes, knelt by his side, mourning his loss and attempting to console his shade.

"I know that soon my own blood will stain the dust of Troy where yours was spilled today, soon our shades will dwell together in Hades' lightless palace. But first I vow I will bring back Priam's son Hektor to be your grave-offering. I will spill Trojan blood on your tomb.

"I know what is foretold, that my own death will follow Hektor's, but that was always my fate: either a short life full of glory in war, or a long one unmemorable, my name forgotten. Once, I might have chosen life, a life at home in Phthia with Patroklos at my side in my father's palace. Once, I might have turned my back on glory and war, if I had known the cost. Now, when all the luster of glory is tarnished by your death, it is too late to choose otherwise. The Achaians expect me to lead them onto the plain tomorrow, and even this night Hephaistos forges gleaming new armor for me to wear into battle. Yet now, when it is too late, I wish I had chosen life—even a life as the lowliest slave—rather than see you carried down to Hades' realm before me."

So Achilles prayed.

Zeus, who hears all prayers of men, sat on high Olympos with Moira at his side. Fate herself, whose decrees even the father of gods and men dares not defy. His heart was moved to pity these warriors, doomed to die so soon.

"Their prayers may move you, Son of Kronos," the spinner of men's lives warned him, "but you know you may not intervene to spare them. They are mortal men, and you yourself determined their fates when you began this war."

"So it must be," Zeus admitted. "Today I had to see my own son killed in battle, my shining favorite Sarpedon, whom I loved as no other. Yet it was his fate to fall to Patroklos's spear, and I did not lift my hand to save him, though I wept to see him stretched lifeless on the ground.

"Yet it had to be. I have seen how the sons born to the unions of gods and men have grown into a race of heroes, too many, too strong. They threaten the order of the Olympian gods and defy Hades to hold them in his realm. I know how silver-footed Thetis will weep to see her glorious son Achilles lying lifeless when she wished him to be immortal. Yet he was destined to surpass his father, so how could I allow him a place among the gods—a place higher than my own?

"And Hektor, mortal man—how often he has sacrificed flawless bulls and burned their fat thighbones to please me. But I cannot fulfill his prayer, for his city is doomed to fall soon after him, and Achilles' vengeful heir will throw Hektor's child to his death from Troy's burning tower.

"So it must be," Moira agreed. "Hektor's fate was sealed the moment his spear drank the lifeblood of Patroklos and he stripped the armor from his corpse. It cannot be changed."

"No, I cannot change fate, yet I am not entirely powerless," replied Zeus the cloud-gatherer, and lightning flashed in his eyes.

So saying, he summoned Dream, who came to him on swift wings from the shores of Lykia, where he had just borne the body of shining Prince Sarpedon home to his people for mourning. "I have another task for you now," Zeus ordered. "On the battlefield before Troy are Hektor and Achilles, both praying for what Fate forbids me to grant them. Yet I may answer them through you, with the vision of what their prayers might bring."

Then Dream flew swiftly at the bidding of the Olympian god, down to the battlefield where both Trojans and Achaians lay asleep beneath the gaze of Night. To Hektor he appeared as his white-armed wife Andromache, to Achilles in the guise of his mother Thetis, silver-footed daughter of the sea. He brushed the eyelids of the sleeping warriors with a feathered touch and whispered to each: "Come rise from your bed, for Zeus has heard your prayer! It is daybreak, time to arm for battle!"

Both warriors opened their eyes and saw that Dawn had already opened the gates to the new day. Their companions were all on their feet and arming for war. Each in his own camp, Hektor and Achilles rejoiced with the knowledge that Zeus the father of the gods had heard his prayer. Divine strength surged through their veins as each man took up his arms. Hektor put on again the armor he had won from Patroklos the day before, but Achilles' panoply was newly crafted by Hephaistos, the armorer of the gods—a gift from his immortal mother. Each warrior armed himself with javelins that had strong ash shafts and double-edged spearheads honed to a killing point. Now it was the time to face his enemy, for Zeus had heard his prayers!

The armies rushed onto the battle plain, filling it with bronze-clad warriors, making it tremble beneath their feet. Both sides advanced, eager for war, and the two warriors who led them most eager of all to spill each other's blood with their sharp bronze.

Achilles seeing Hektor wearing his own armor, stripped from the corpse of his companion, cried out first. "Here he is, the man who tore out my heart when he thrust his spear into Patroklos, the best of men! Come meet your death, son of Priam!"

Hektor felt the power of the god in him and never hesitated to face his enemy. "You will never kill me with words, son of Peleus! I know your spear is sharp, but so is mine. Let us see which man shall die here today!"

With that, he let fly his weapon, and Achilles too, at the same moment, so that the two spears flew past each other, almost colliding in mid-air as both armies held their breath. Hektor's spear hit first,

shearing through the rim of Achilles' shield to strike his helmet. But Achilles' throw was more true. His bronze spearpoint hit just above the top of Hektor's corselet, beneath the Trojan's jaw and cutting through his spine at the base of the brain.

Hektor's life was severed and his lifeblood spilled in the dust. But his soul hovered nearby in the world of living men instead of departing for the realm of Haides. This was the will of Zeus, that Hektor might see his prayer fulfilled.

Then the father of the gods moved among the Trojan captains, Deiphobos, Paris, and the other sons of Priam, filling them with divine resolve. Polydamas cried out to rally them, "Why do you stand here gaping in horror at Hektor's death? Now is the time to strike, now while the Achaians can see bloodthirsty Achilles lying dead at Hektor's hand! They thought he was like a god, invincible, but all their hopes for victory lie now in the dust. Strike now, strike them hard, and they will lose all heart for battle. Zeus has given us this moment, do not lose it now, do not let Hektor's life be spent in vain!"

He had tears. His heart ached for her grief, for his orphaned son. But when he reached out to embrace her, his arms were like vapor, invisible, unfelt. His words went unheard as he cried, "Now I know why the shades of the dead seek out the river of forgetfulness in the realm of Haides! This is too painful to endure!"

King Priam held a splendid funeral for the best of all his sons. The Trojan people were nine days gathering the wood for his pyre, and when it was ready Priam sacrificed a hundred flawless oxen, cut their throats and let the hot blood spurt onto the ground to honor him. But Hektor's shade could take no comfort from it, no life or warmth.

All day and night the corpse-fire burned, consuming the flesh of Hektor, Priam's son, breaker of horses. Yet even when his brothers quenched the flames with red wine and took his bones from the ashes, Hektor's shade did not depart the world of men. His bones were placed in a golden casket and a great mound of stones laid over them to mark where he lay, and he remained there as a ghost, a witness to the fate of Troy.

glory and war, if I had known the cost."

The Trojan warriors charged forward against their enemies as they stood stunned at the sight of Achilles, fallen in the dust. The Achaians' courage left them, and they had no heart to resist this assault. Only one man, great Aias, Telemon's son, was ready to defend the body of the best of the Achaians. He planted his mighty legs squarely, grounded his shield, and bellowed defiance at the onrushing Trojans.

But Zeus had filled all the warriors of Troy that day with the strength of heroes, and Anchises's son Aineas never hesitated to stand up to the challenge of Aias. He cried out, "You can join Achilles in death if you love him so well!" So saying, he thrust his well-honed spear, cutting through every layer of Aias's thick shield and also through the polished bronze of his corselet. The son of Telemon felt the sharp bronze bite into his belly, but still he stayed on his feet until Aineas pulled the spearhead out, dragging his entrails with it in a gush of blood. Great Aias fell bellowing into the heap of his own intestines, and there the shade of Hektor watched him die.

With the two best warriors of the Achaians now defeated, the father of the gods loosed Panic and his brother Rout among them, and they fled like cattle with wolves at their heels. The Trojans pursued them to their ships and beyond, into the sea, those who were able to escape the slaughter at the shore and drag their vessels into the safety of the water. Many died there at the sea's edge, carried to the bottom by the weight of their bronze armor, and the sea foam was red with their blood.

Following in the wake of the army, one young son of Priam paused at the body of Achilles, to strip him of his god-crafted armor. This was Lykaon, whom Achilles had once taken captive and sold into slavery, but Priam had ransomed him back. Bending over to lift off Achilles' helmet, Lykaon gasped in surprise, because despite the gash in his skull and the blood filling his mouth, the Achaian warrior was still breathing—Achilles lived! "Now it is your turn to suffer slavery!" Lykaon cried. So the shade of Hektor saw his killer, Peleus's godlike son, stripped naked, bound, and dragged captive into Troy.

Before long, the triumphant Trojan warriors had returned to the city gates, beaming with them the spoils of their victory: gold, bronze, horses, and slaves that the fleeing Achaians had left behind on the shore. But there was one burden heavier than all the rest: the body of Hektor, Troy's fallen champion.

As he was borne into the city, the Trojan heralds cried aloud: "Come and look one last time upon Hektor, every man and woman who ever rejoiced to see him ride through these gates in triumph!" Then there was lamentation amid the joy, for the loss that was the price of victory. And above all the tears of white-armed Andromache, who flung herself across her husband's body, inconsolable. "You have saved your city, my heart's treasure, but you could not save yourself! You loved Troy more than you loved your wife and child!"

Seeing her mourn him, the shade of Hektor would have wept if one sacrifice the Trojans did not make at Hektor's pyre, though his brother Paris demanded it. "Let Achilles' blood pay for Hektor's! Let the life of Peleus's son be the price for taking Hektor's life."

So at Paris's orders, the captive Achilles was brought out to the foot of the pyre, bound for sacrifice. But just when the Trojans were pulling back his head to bare his throat for the knife, the thunder of Zeus sounded overhead, so clear a sign of the god's displeasure that even Paris could not deny it. Instead of being killed, then, the best warrior of the Achaians was shackled as a slave with heavy bronze and forced to turn the millstone in Priam's palace.

Achilles had been a prince, he had once offered gracious hospitality to kings. Now he was reduced to the lowest form of slavery, put to the work of a dumb beast. His body had once been anointed with the best scented oil, but soon his nakedness was caked in filth, calloused, scarred by the whip. His hair and beard were uncut and tangled. The palace servants pelted him with dung and rotten garbage, the children cast stones and sticks at him. This was Achilles, his life spared by the will of Zeus.

He prayed in his despair, begging the father of the gods to tell him what crime had he committed, that he would be punished so. What god had he offended? Even having his throat cut on Hektor's funeral pyre would be better than this, better than a life of slavery, a life in chains, mocked and reviled.

From time to time, Paris would bring guests into the yard where he was chained to the millstone, telling them, "This was once the same Achilles who thought he could bring down the walls of Troy. Look at him now! He does the work of a mule, grinding our grain. When his father Peleus learned he was captive here, he offered his weight in gold to ransom him, but I will not ever give him up, he is so useful here." So Paris mocked Peleus's son, who had once been compared to a god.

Under his breath, Achilles would sometimes reply, "You would speak differently, Paris, if I were free, if I had the spear of Pelian ash that was given to my father by the gods. I remember how you ran from me on the battlefield, and your piss ran down your legs in terror that you might have to face bloodthirsty Achilles. I killed your brother Hektor, and he was a far better man than you." But his shackles were strong and his chains were heavy, and all Achilles could do was moan and bow his back to the lash.

Priam, King of Troy was an old man, and he died soon after Hektor's funeral, worn out with grief for the loss of so many fine sons killed in the war with the Achaians. His son Paris took the throne after him, ignoring the claim of Hektor's son, who had once been known as Astyanax, Lord of the City. But the child was too young to rule, and with Paris king, he was now called by his birth name, Skamandrios. Troy was full of orphans in those days, and he was only one among them, while Paris's son Aganos was favored as the

next heir to Troy

Hektor knew he had no cause to fault the gods in the fulfillment of their bargain. Skamandnos was alive and free, he did not go to bed hungry, he was not shackled in chains or dressed in rags. His mother saw to this, weaving the child fine garments with her own white hands. Indeed, her son was to become the center of her life, and she cared for nothing else but the memory of her lost husband.

It was painful for Hektor to see her, the heavy weight of grief and care that bowed down her shoulders and slowly turned her hair gray. To watch his only son, so well beloved, grow up fatherless. Skamandnos had no real memory of his father, only the image of a high-crested bronze helmet, flashing so fiercely it had frightened him as a small child. Hektor's shade was constantly reaching out to them—to touch them, speak to them—but always in vain. If only they might hear him, only once, just a word!

Yet surely this was just what he had prayed for: to see his son grow to manhood. If the gods had fulfilled his prayer, how could he now wish for more?

Seasons passed, and came a day when Skamandnos joined with the other boys in Priam's palace to play at war. Each child had a spearshaft and a wooden shield, and Paris's son Aganos even had his own bronze helmet with a nodding horsehair crest that his father the king had ordered made for him. The pack of boys raced through the palace courtyards, shouting out their war cries and attacking the livestock kept penned near the kitchens.

Achilles heard their shrill voices as he labored turning the gristmill, straining in his harness like an ox against the weight of the millstone. So had he played himself as a boy in Peleus's palace, but now he was to these Trojan boys only an object for torment.

"Die, Achaian dog!" they cried, hurling their makeshift spears at him, boasting as they imagined that noble warriors did on the battlefield. The boys dashed out one by one to assault him, never quite daring to come too close to the chained man they all knew as Bloodthirsty Achilles. Only one, the smallest, ran out to jab his weapon hard into Achilles' thigh, again and again before he could defend himself. Tears of rage on the child's face, and his shrill voice: "You killed my father! You killed him! I'll kill you!"

Many children's fathers he had killed. But just as the boy attacked him, Achilles thought he saw the dim, insubstantial form of an armored warrior reaching out as if to snatch the child away from harm. He recognized that warrior, knew his name, had hated him more than any other man. Hektor, killer of Patroklos.

Achilles suddenly found himself unable to breathe. He saw the boys running away, but the form of the warrior remained, and as Achilles continued to stare at him, the shade seemed to take on a wavering substance.

Finally Achilles spoke. "You're dead. I know you are dead. I saw them burn your body. They were going to sacrifice me on your funeral pyre."

It was Hektor's turn to be startled. "You can see me. You can hear me?"

"I prayed to Zeus," Hektor said slowly, trying to understand. "That night before we fought, I prayed. I knew you were the better warrior, always favored by the gods. And Patroklos had prophesied—his dying words—that my own death would come soon after his. So I prayed to Zeus, that if I had to die, at least it might be saving Troy, saving my son to grow to manhood and take my place as defender of the city.

"So here I am, as you see me, the ghost of the man I was, bound to the place where my bones are buried. Every day I see my son alive, I see him growing up to be a man, as Zeus fulfilled my prayer. But he can never see me or hear my voice. When I try to touch him, my hand dissipates like a fog. But you—you see me! You can hear me. No one else can, not even my wife or my son. Only you."

"Then am I dead?" Achilles wondered. "Are we both ghosts?"

"You are alive," Hektor told him. "Your flesh is solid and warm."

Achilles sighed. "You can see your son every day, but I have a son I have never seen. I was called away to war before he was born. They call him Neoptolemos, the young warrior. He must be grown almost to a man by now, but he has never seen his father. Perhaps he thinks I am dead, killed in the war. I hope he does. Better dead than alive like this, a slave.

"There was a prophecy when I was born that I would have either a long life, or a short one full of glory. But I wanted even more. I wanted immortality. My mother, you must know, is Thetis, the sea king's daughter, a favorite of Zeus. She used to hint sometimes that the god was really my father, not Peleus. That I should have been a god myself.

"I always hated the thought that I would die. I chose war and glory, thinking it might win me immortality. But when Patroklos was killed I knew my own death would follow his, and I regretted my choice. I was full of rage, and I vowed to take your life not only in revenge for his death, but my own.

"Now this is my punishment. I prayed to Zeus, and this is how he has answered me." He might have said more, but just then came the overseer with his whip, demanding to know why the millstone had stopped turning, and Hektor disappeared from Achilles' sight.

Yet they continued to meet as the years passed, the shade of Hektor and the warrior who had killed him. Those years saw Achilles worn down from a man in his godlike youth to one aged before his time, bent and aching from heavy toil. But Hektor's shade remained as he had been at the moment of his death. Neither envied the other his condition.

Troy also had changed since the war, rebuilding its walls and towers even stronger than before. Trade once again flowed through the city, filling its storerooms with gold and bronze and other fine goods. There was even some renewed trade with the Achaian lands. Paris the king was as rich as his father Priam had been at the height of his wealth, before war brought ruin to Troy. Now he lived in ease with his queen Helen, and his bow lay unstrung in the palace armory. He left the fighting to younger men, the grandsons of Priam.

The son of Paris fell dead from his chariot

"I killed you, I know I did. You are still wearing the armor I gave to Patroklos the day he died. I meant it to keep him safe in battle, but the gods had other plans."

Hektor looked down at the bronze corselet he was wearing. "The armor I took from Patroklos is stored in the palace, waiting until my son is old enough to wear it. This ... is not real." He paused, staring at the Achaian warrior in his chains. "I thought I had killed you, but I see that I failed."

Bitterly, Achilles replied, "You almost did kill me. I only wish your spearcast had been true." He shook his head in confusion. "Or am I really dead? Can it be that this is really Haides' realm, not Priam's, and I am being punished for some crime against the gods? Or else, if I am truly alive, why do I see your shade here in the world of men? Have you come to take revenge because I killed you?"

Ambassadors came once more from the court of Peleus in Phthia to say that the old king had died and offering an even greater ransom for his heir Achilles, if he yet lived. Again Paris denied them, saying, "The slave Achilles is dead and his bones were thrown to the dogs. Hektor's killer will never have an honored resting place in his homeland."

It was the only time Hektor ever saw Achilles shed tears, when he told him that his father had finally died. Achilles mourned him, saying, "Peleus was a man so beloved by the gods that they gave him an immortal to be his wife, the silver-footed daughter of the sea. He had every blessing in his life, but one curse: that he would die alone, with no living son to succeed him. I vowed to him when I left for the war that I would never cut my hair until my return, so that I could sacrifice it to the River Spenchios, along with a hundred fine bulls and fifty

unblemished arms. It was his dearest wish, but my vow was empty. I will never see Phthia again or its sacred spring, just as I will never again see my father, unless we meet in the lands of the dead."

"There was a young man with the ambassadors," Hektor told him, "who called himself Neoptolemos son of Achilles."

"So he was here in this palace, so near, yet I have never seen him!" Achilles looked then as if he might weep again, but did not. "I would not have him see me here, though. Not like this. Best if he thinks I am dead."

From that time it was almost as if he had died in truth. No more ambassadors came from Phthia or any of the Achaian lands to ask for him. Little by little, men forgot he had ever been anything but a slave, until the name Achilles son of Peleus meant only the godlike, bloodthirsty warrior once defeated by Priam's noble son Hektor, not the wretched slave who still turned the millstone in his chains.

In those same years, Skamandrios son of Hektor grew from a small boy to a tall one, then to a young man and a warrior. Like his father, he was the most skilled in Troy at breaking horses and equally proficient with a spear. But Paris king of Troy favored his own son Aganos, as beautiful as a god. When Aganos came to manhood, Paris went to the palace storerooms and brought out the glorious bronze armor of Achilles, made by Hephaistos himself, and bestowed it on his son.

When she learned of this, Hektor's widow Andromache went to Paris and protested that the armor belonged to Skamandrios by right, as the spoils of war won by Hektor, his father. "My husband was the war leader of Troy, its defender! The city would not be standing today if he had not stood alone to face the deadly wrath of Achilles! Hektor died so you could live and take the throne that should have been his! How can you show his memory such dishonor? How can you disinherit his only son?"

Paris dismissed her complaints. "Armor such as this should be worn by a god—or at least a king. Aganos will be king after me, he deserves only the best. Your son still has the armor Hektor stripped from Patroklos. That should be good enough for him."

At these words, too harsh to be borne, Andromache covered her face with her veil and wept. Skamandrios tried to comfort her. "The king is right. I do have the other armor and I can hardly wear both at the same time. What I have suits me well enough. No other man can say he has better, except Aganos, and it was won for him by my father, not his own."

Then after many years, war came again to Troy, as it had come to many other lands. Pirates began to roam the seas, burning and looting wherever they could. The palace of Nestor at sandy Pylos was burned to the ground, and the great citadel of Argos itself was besieged as the kings of the Achaian lands began to make war on one another.

As always, the best defense of Troy was in its strong walls, but Paris gave his son Aganos command of all the Trojan warriors. "Aganos is rash, with no experience of war. He celebrates all the brave deeds he will do in battle, but he has never thrust his spear into an enemy's belly or felt sharp bronze bite into his own flesh." So said many men of Troy, but Paris would not heed them.

The enemy came by ship, a vast fleet drawn up where the Achaians had beached their black ships so many years before. But this time there would be no allies to come to the aid of Troy. In those days, every land and kingdom was looking only to its own defense.

"The walls will hold," said the old men of Troy. "Trust in the strength of the walls, for they served us well against the Achaians, who were better armed than these pirates."

And the shade of Hektor cried out, unheard. "Listen to them!"

But Aganos son of Paris wanted glory, and he ordered the chariots harnessed, the gates opened wide. Troy's chariots poured out onto the battle plain, Aganos at their head, gleaming like the bright sun in his shining bronze, the god-forged armor taken from Achilles. Skamandrios was the best of all the Trojan charioteers, but he would not serve Aganos. Instead he drove the horses of his uncle Lykaon, a son of Priam who was not yet too old for the battlefield.

From the ranks of the enemy a single warrior stepped forth to challenge the Trojans, standing like a god of war in his fiercely crested helmet. He called out so the entire host could hear, "Who will be the first to die at the hand of Achilles' son Neoptolemos? I will make Troy remember him!"

Paris's rash heir replied, "If you ask my name, it is Aganos son of Paris. Any man knows who my father is."

But these were his last words. Neoptolemos's spearpoint flew through the air to pierce the nasal of his helmet and the bone behind it, bursting eyes and brains. The son of Paris fell dead from his chariot into the dust, all his shining glory dulled.

Next behind him in the Trojan host was Lykaon, with Skamandrios driving his long-maned horses. Neoptolemos cast another spear, and Hektor's shade saw it fly, the sharp-honed bronze spearhead thirsty for the lifeblood of his son. He reached to stop it with his insubstantial hands, but this desperate effort was in vain. The bronze drank Skamandrios's life, and Hektor with a soundless cry of grief watched his son choke on his own blood, watched him fall and die—his last sight in the world of living men.

Darkness took him then and bore him down at last to Hades' realm, lamenting the lost life of his beloved son, grown to manhood and dying in defense of Troy.

From within the city's walls, Achilles could hear the sounds of battle where he labored in his chains, and soon he could smell the smoke as Troy began to go up in flames. After a time he heard men's voices, and one of them ordering the rest. "Kill them all! Every Trojan man and every child. I won't be satisfied with any less in payment for the death of Achilles, my father!"

The old man's heart beat faster when he heard those words in his son's voice, the son he had never seen. Neoptolemos! He pulled urgently at his chains, but if he had ever possessed the strength to loose them, age had weakened him. Still the sounds of killing came closer and still he could recognize that voice, implacable in its vengeance. "Cut their throats! Kill them all! No mercy for Trojans!"

Until at last the invading warriors burst into the courtyard where he was chained, hard-eyed men all spattered with blood. And the one who was their leader, like a god of war in his bronze armor.

Neoptolemos! cried the old man's heart, recognizing his own son.

The vengeful warrior pointed to him with his sword, a bronze blade stained with the lifeblood of Trojans. "Kill that old wretch, too. Keep only the women alive, and the slaves worth selling."

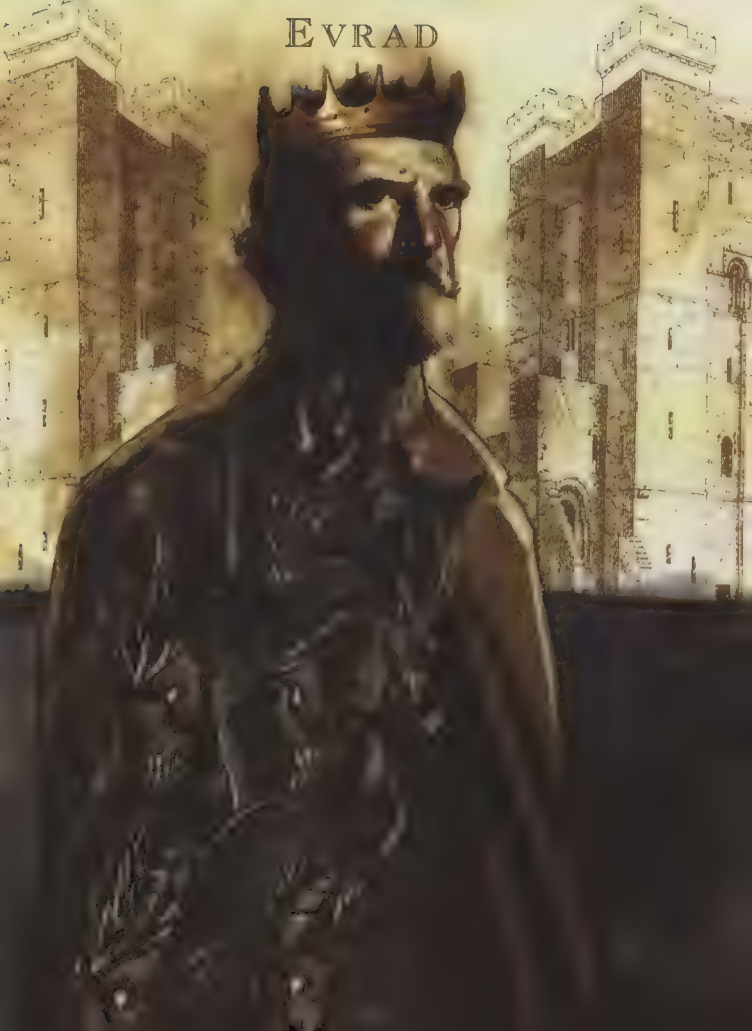
Neoptolemos!

But he could not say the name of his son aloud, and a moment later the edge of a bronze sword silenced the voice of Achilles forever.

At last came Dawn, to sweep aside the night and open the gates to a new day. The rising sun summoned the warriors of Troy and Achaia from their dreams. In the Trojan camp Hektor son of Priam opened his eyes, and by the Achaian ships Peleus's son Achilles woke to the sound of men around him arming themselves for war. And each man knew that Zeus the father of the gods had answered his prayer.

into the dust, all his shining glory dulled.

They both rose and strapped on their armor. Each man placed on his head a helmet of flashing bronze and took up his javelins with strong ash shafts and double-edged spearheads honed to a killing point. For he knew that the time had come for him to meet his fate, to step forward into the embrace of Moira, whom no man can ever hope to evade.


EVRAD

NO STORY REALLY ENDS WITH "HAPPILY EVER AFTER." IT'S WHAT COMES AFTER THAT'S REALLY THE STORY.

STRIFE IN LINGERS MEMORY

BY CARRIE VAUGHN
ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LEE

MY FATHER WAS A WISE MAN TO WHOM MANY CAME SEEKING ADVICE. During his audiences I'd lurk behind his chair or fetch his cup, and they called me fair, even when I was little. I grew to be golden-haired and wary. I was destined for—something.

War overwhelmed us. The Heir to the Fortress was dead—no, in exile, nearly the same. The evil rose, broke the land over an iron knee, and even my father went into hiding.

Then he came.

I was eighteen. The stranger was—hard to say. He looked young but carried such a weight of care, he might have lived many lifetimes already. He came to ask my father how he might make his way along the cursed paths that led to the ancient fortress now held by the enemy.

My father proclaimed, "That way is barred to any who are not of the Heir's blood, but that line is dead. It is useless."

Our gazes met, mine and that stranger's, and I saw in him a shuttered light waiting to blaze forth. I gripped the back of my father's chair to steady myself.

The stranger and I knew in that moment what was destined to be, though our elders needed a bit more persuading.

So it came to pass that the stranger, Evrad—Heir to the Fortress, the true-blooded prince himself—took the cursed paths and led an army to overthrow the stronghold of his enemy and claim the ancient fortress as his own. He married the wizard's daughter and made her—me—his Queen. Happily, the land settled into a long-awaited peace.

The night after the day of his coronation and of our wedding we had our bed chamber alone and to ourselves. When the door closed, we looked at one another for a long time, not believing that this moment had come at last, remembering all the moments we believed it would not come at all. Then, all at once, we fell into each other's arms.

He made love to me as if the world were ending. I drowned in the fury of it, clinging to him like he was a piece of splintered hull after a shipwreck. Exhausted, we rested in each other's arms. I sang him to sleep and, running my fingers through his thick hair, fell asleep myself.

I had dreamed of this, sleeping protected by him. I had dreamed of waking in his arms, sunlight through the window painting our chamber golden, drawing on his warmth in the chill of morning.

Instead, I awoke to the sound of a scream. Evrad's scream. He thrashed, kicking me. I backed away, arms covering my head. Our blankets twisted, pulling away from the bed as he fought with them. When I dared to look, he had curled up, drawing his limbs close. He was trembling so hard I felt it through the bed.

"Evrad?" I whispered. He remained hunched over and shaking, so I reached for him. "Evrad. Please."

I touched his shoulder, the slope of it glowing pale in moonlight shining through the window. It was damp with sweat.

He flinched at the touch and looked at me, his eyes wide and wild. My stomach clenched—he did not seem to see me.

Then, "Alida?"

He came to life, returned to himself, and pulled me close in an embrace. I held him as tightly as I could, but my grip seemed so weak compared to his.

"Oh, my love," he said over and over. "I thought it was a dream you, peace—you. I dreaded waking to find you weren't real."

"Hush. Oh, please hush. You're safe."

I said those words to him many times, on many nights. I kept hoping he would believe me.

Strife lingered in the memory of what we had suffered. He defeated an army of horrors, but the demons may yet overcome him.

He kept the nightmares well hidden. He always appeared to his men, his guards, his people as the hero, the savior, the King. He looked the part, standing tall, smiling easily and accepting gracefully the adoration of hardened warriors and toddling children alike.

He turned his best face toward the people, keeping his secret soul hidden. But he could not hide it from me. So it fell to me to keep my best face toward him, to be strong for him, and hide my secret soul away.

One night, he came to our chamber carrying an arcane-looking bottle covered with dust, the cap sealed with wax.

"I will sleep through the night," he said in much the same way he'd once said he would defeat the dark army that threatened to overrun him. Liquid sloshed in the bottle when he set it on the table.

"What is it? Rare potion?"

"Rare whisky," he said with a grunt. "Perhaps it will make me forget the shadows."

I pursed my lips, making a wry smile. "That will inspire sweet dreams, and not the comfort of my arms?"

"Oh, my love." He touched my cheek with all the tenderness I could hope for, though his face was lined with worry. I took his hands, locking their anxious movements in mine.

Once, we needed no words, but I could not read the thoughts that clouded his expression. During the war, he had been proud, his look keen and determined. I had never seen him so careworn.

He kissed my hands and went out of our chambers. At least he left the whisky behind.

A month passed, then came the night I awoke alone.

Perhaps the stillness woke me. Midnight—the dark chill of night when he usually began sweating, trembling as if all the fears he had kept at bay during the war came on him at once—had passed and no screams woke me. I sat up, felt all around the bed, looked when my sight adjusted to the dark. I was alone.

I searched for him. Wrapping my cloak tight around me, I went along the battlements where I could see half the realm across the plains. I searched the stables, where he might have sought the calm influence of sleeping horses. I carried a lantern through stone corridors where no one had walked since Evrad claimed the fortress.

I found him crouched in a forgotten corner, arms wrapped around his head, face turned to the wall. He had managed to tie a cloak around his middle, but it was slipping off his shoulders.

A guard walking his post from the other end of the corridor found him at the same time. "My liege!" the man cried and rushed toward him.

I interposed, stopping him with a raised hand. "Please. Stay back." Turning to Evrad I said, "My lord? My lord, are you awake?"

I touched his shoulder. He looked at me. The lantern light showed his cheeks wet with tears. "Come, my lord. Let's go to bed." I helped him to his feet, like he was an old man or a child.

To the guard I said, "You will not speak of this. You will keep this secret." And what of the next night? And what of the night the guards found him before I did? I was a wizard's daughter but I still needed sleep. I needed more eyes. "You will help me keep this secret, yes?"

"Yes, my Queen. Oh yes." Wonder and pity filled his gaze. I remembered his face, learned his name, Petro. If I ever heard rumor of the King's illness, this man would answer for it.

We had far nights. Some nights, he only whimpered in his sleep, in the throes of visions I did not want to imagine. Some nights, drunk on wine, we threw logs on the fire until it blazed, making the room hot, and we played until we wore each other out.

Other nights, I wore my cloak, took another in case he had lost his, and searched deserted corridors by lantern light. I always waited until I had put him back to bed and he slept before I sat by the fire and cried.

At last, weary and despairing, I departed in the shrouded hour before dawn. I used craft that my father taught me—how to move without sound, how to turn aside the curious gaze, how to not leave tracks. I left my own horse behind and took one from the couriers that would not be so quickly mussed. I rode hard, turned off the main way, and found the forested path that led through ravine and glen to my father's valley.

After the war, he secluded himself in a valley beyond the line of hills where the city lay, a day's journey away. He said he wished to be out of reach of peaceful folk who would trouble him with petty complaints now that the great matters were over. He said he was finished dispensing wisdom for people simply because they asked for it.

What a gentle place. I had traveled with him when he came to live here, but my heart had been so full of the times, of the ache of war and separation from my beloved, that I hadn't looked around me. Water ran frothing down a rocky hillside and became a stream that flowed through a meadow of tall grass scattered with the color of wildflowers. Late sun shining through pollen turned the air golden. I could smell the light, fresh and fertile.

I made a mistake. I shouldn't have run away. Or better, I should

have brought Evrad here, to this peace

The whitewashed cottage sat where the grass ended and trees began. Smoke rose from a hole in the roof

My horse, breathing hard and soaked with sweat, sighed deeply and lowered her head to graze. I pulled off her tack, brushed her, and let her roam free. I left my gear by the cottage's door and went inside.

A fire burned at the hearth in the back of the cottage's one room. Near it were a kettle and all manner of cooking implements. A cot occupied one corner, a table and chair another, and the rest of the walls had shelves and shelves of books. My father sat in a great stuffed chair near the fire, wrapped in a blanket, gazing into a shallow bowl of water he held in his lap.

Quietly, I sat at his feet as I had when I was little.

"My Queen, is it?" he said. A smile shifted the wrinkles of his face. He was bald, but for a fringe of white hair.

"Your daughter still."

"He is King, so he must hide his fears. It falls to you, then, to keep him sane."

"This has been a mistake. Would the true Heir of the Fortress suffer so?"

"Would one who was not the Heir have survived to suffer so?"

"I cannot do this," I said, tears falling at last.

My father smiled and touched my hair with his arthritic hand. "He said the same thing to me before he departed for the last battle. I will tell you what I told him." He held my hand. His was warm and dry. "'That may be true,' I said. 'But you must try, because no one else will.'"

I pressed his hand to my face, wishing I was a child again, able to hide behind his chair and take no part in the worries of the world.

He continued. "You may have the hardest battle of all. No one victory will defeat this enemy. This is not a beast to slay and be done with."

"And no one will sing of my battles."

HERE WAS MY HERO, MY KING, FACE UPLIFTED, STRIDING WITH STRENGTH AND DETERMINATION. GRIM AND FIERCE, AS I HAD SEEN HIM RIDE TO BATTLE, AS I HAD NOT SEEN HIM IN WEEKS.

"No, I gave you away."

"Father—"

He sighed. "Why have you come here? What trouble drives you from your home?"

"Perhaps I only wish to visit you."

"I still have sight, girl." He touched the surface of the water in the basin and flicked his fingers at me, sprinkling me. I flinched, then hugged my knees.

He shook his head. "I was supposed to be able to leave the keeping of the world to its heirs."

"If you have your sight, then you know what is wrong."

"Tell me. I want to hear what you think is wrong."

I was Queen of this land, the destined love of the greatest of heroes, fortunate and blessed beyond reason, and he made me feel like a hapless child. Perhaps that was why the heroes in the stories were almost always orphans.

"The war haunts him," I said. "He has nightmares. He cannot sleep. He buries all this deep in his heart, but it is festering there. How long can he survive like this? I am afraid, more afraid than I ever was when he carried his sword against the enemy. I try to comfort him. I don't know what to do."

Grunting with the effort, he leaned over the arm of his chair to set the basin on the floor. "So, are you looking for a potion or a spell that will set all to rights?"

I hadn't thought of that, when I decided to come here. If there were such a thing I would gladly take it. But my coming here was selfish. I wanted to rest in the shelter of another, as tired as I was of *being* shelter for another.

"Or do you simply flee from what you do not understand?"

I could have cried, but I pretended to be strong. In a world where fate had ordered all our actions and brought us all to this point, I was terrified that it should leave us now. "The evil lingers. I thought he had defeated it for all time."

"He is battle-weary. That is no surprise. As for a cure? Time and care. I know no magic to speed it along. We must be vigilant. Each of us has a role in the war. Now, yours has come."

"But he is the warrior and King. I am just a—" I almost said any of a dozen things: woman, child, pawn, symbol. None of the stones prepared me to be anything else.

I slept curled in a blanket near the hearth that night—the first night in many I had not been awakened by sleepwalking or nightmare cries. I treasured the peace of the valley. In the morning, I sat in the meadow by the stream. Since settling at the fortress and into my life as Queen, I had seldom touched living earth or smelled grass and wildflowers warmed by the sun. Here, I could pretend none of it had happened.

My father joined me. He spent a long time settling to the ground, leaning on his cane. He'd never used a cane before. Too late, I reached to help him, to give him my arm to lean on. He'd never needed help before, so I didn't think of it. He spent time arranging his cane and robes around him, gazing over the dancing water.

"When will you return to him?" he said at last.

"I don't know." I had to gather my strength. I could spend the rest of my life gathering strength and still not have enough.

"Make it soon."

I'd been picking at grass, weaving something of a tangled wreath. I threw the mess of it into the stream. "If you don't wish me to stay, I can go elsewhere."

"I want you to go to your home. Your child should know his father."

"My—" I flushed, my whole body burning from my scalp to my bare toes. Then the expected movement. I put my hand on my belly. "You don't mean—"

He smiled, a cat-wise smile of secrets. "I still have sight. You—are still learning."

A child. Me—a child. *My* child. *His* child. Oh, have mercy. Forgive me.

"Father, I must go."

"Yes, you must."

I caught my horse, saddled her quickly, and fled in a whirlwind. I had galloped a mile when I pulled up suddenly—I was carrying a child. I should be more careful.

What would Evrad say? Perhaps he would sleep well, with a child in his arms.

Halfway back to the fortress, a thunder of hoofbeats galloped toward me. I waited for the rider to appear around the curve in the road. The horse was a snow white charger, with a gold breastplate and gold fixings on his tack, tail flying, mane rippling. His rider pulled up hard, and his hooves raised dust as he skidded in the road.

I knew this stallion, and I knew the rider who jumped from the saddle and ran toward me

As I dismounted I stumbled, my grip on the saddle keeping me upright Here was my hero, my King, face uplifted, striding with strength and determination. Grim and fierce, as I had seen him ride to battle, as I had not seen him in weeks I had not lost him to the war

I would have run to meet him, but I had moved just a few steps away from my horse when he reached me He caught me in his arms and held tight. His leather doublet pressed my flesh, his rough cheek brushed mine

"I'm sorry," I cried again and again, weeping on his shoulder

He made soothing noises. "Hush It's enough that you're safe I guessed where you had gone, and I meant to go and beg you to return I meant to make promises—to tie myself to the bed so you wouldn't have to search after me at midnight anymore To have my guards knock me unconscious every evening so I might sleep through the night "

I laughed. "No guard of yours would even try, my lord."

He touched my cheeks, wiping away tears "I know you are a wizard's daughter Your spirit is wild, free as the wind, and your will is strong. I have nothing that can bind you—but tell me you will never leave me again Promise me."

Oh, how such words would bind me Did he not know that,words are nearly all that will bind a wizard, or his daughter?

"I promise," I said

Men fight for symbols a crown, a throne, lines on a map.

When he reclaimed the fortress and we married, our story ended but our lives didn't. None of the old stones prepared me for the battles I now fought

I remembered the night he left my father's hall to meet the last battle, when all but I believed he was marching to his death

I held him as long as I could. "I wish I could go with you. I wish I could do more than wait here for news "

"But you're already doing so much

"What? What am I doing?" I said, smiling with wonder

"You are the symbol of what we fight for- all that is beautiful."

Men fight for symbols. What do women fight for?

Again I wandered nighttime passages, my way lit by a dim lantern, searching. I moved slowly, some seven months along my child s time I wore two cloaks and fur boots, because winter was upon us. On bad nights, when the terrors wrenched Evrad to immobility, he found dark passages and shivered there in the cold, fighting demons in his mind I walked every corridor in the fortress and could not find him Petro had not seen him either

On bad nights, he hid in dark passages. This night was worse

I found him on the battlements of the highest tower A spire jutting above the sheer wall of the fortress, it served as a watchtower and a place for message fires. He leaned on the stone wall, gazing straight down, a hundred feet to hard earth

I caught my breath and swallowed a scream.

"My lord? Evrad," I said softly, my voice shaking. "What are you doing?"

He climbed to sit on the lip of the wall He looked at me, his eyes were feral, shining He trembled Sweat matted his hair, and his face was pale, drained of blood He wore only breeches and gooseflesh covered his arms

If I reached for him, the gesture might push him over.

"Go back to bed. Why must you follow me?"

Because I loved him Because I worried about him. Because it was my duty, and I must do it so the secret of his nighttime terrors did not spread. But I didn't say those things.

"I will follow you to the end of the world, over cliffs into fiery rifts that split the earth if I must But I will follow you "

"Like the demons "

"I'm faster than demons They will not reach you before I do."

"Will you follow me there?" He nodded over the wall to the long drop

The moon shone near full, low in the sky, painting the land with shadows. Lurking behind each house and tower and city wall, stretching away from every rise in the land, every tree on the plain, black shapes reached toward the fortress

"They whisper in my ear, *jump* Oh Alida "

My knees gave way and I sat on the stone, lurching with my swollen weight. I couldn't shutter the moon, to chase away the shadows.

"Evrad. What did you fight for? Did you fight for this, to cast yourself off a tower? Then they've won. The enemy is dead and gone, but will still win the war. It was all for nothing What did you fight for?"

"I don't know anymore—"

"Me, Evrad! You fought for me! Now I am yours. You don't have to fight anymore You've won."

He shook his head. "I'm not worthy of you. You deserve better Someone who doesn't have nightmares "

I laughed, clapping my hand over my mouth because the sound was so acrid. "I deserve better? Evrad—you are the hero of the age, the king of legends. And I deserve *better*? Who do you think I am?"

He looked at me. His frown was long, unmovable. "You are everything."

I crawled toward him. "Come down from there, Evrad. Come to me " I stretched my hand to him. I had to be stronger than the shadows My voice had to be more alluring. "Touch me just touch me "

A small goal, an easy quest, well within his reach A slender hand, poised in the dark He leaned, lips parted in an expression of longing

He fell off the lip of the wall and into my arms.

"I don't want better. I don't want the hero and King. I want you." We sat for many hours, hugging each other against the cold

I brought him to bed and wrapped myself around him He shivered. I was not blanket enough against the cold

"Do you see them? In the shadows on the wall," he said. Candle flames flickered in a draft The warped shadows of a cup, a candlestick, a comb danced and trembled all around.

"It's only light and dark."

"I know that—but I see memories. I see a thousand goblin warriors throwing themselves against the burning ramparts of the city. I see them pulling my men into the flames. And there's nothing I can do I didn't destroy them. They're still here, watching us "

Almost I could see their red eyes and clawed hands For all his army had saved, ten thousand men had perished in the war Goblins shook spears that rippled like ocean waves above their heads. I had not been there, yet I could almost see. He lived with such visions in his waking mind. How did he endure?

I got up and blew out the candle, banishing the shadows. Returning to bed, I pressed myself against his back and whispered in his ear. "They're gone now."

He was crying.

Over time, we learned what sparked the grim memories Bonfires. Shadows under a full moon. Then, our sons in armor. Oh, were his nightmares fierce after Biron's first day in armor. If I could have changed the world, altered the course of sun and moon, rewritten tales of destiny that had been put down by great unseen hands, our children would never have learned to fight. But they were the children of a King and must learn the ways of arms. Evrad insisted on this Even after waking in the night and telling me that the faces of his men

dying over and over in his dreams had changed, and were now the faces of our children.

Over time, nights became easier. With children to occupy him—first a son, then two daughters, and two more sons—he went to bed happy and weary. He did not notice the shadows so much.

Thus peace ruled the land for our children's time, and our children's children's time, and will rule beyond. Just like in the stories I sit by a window, my gray hair braided behind me, my withered

"But—it means the hero's journey is not ended. It adds all the more to his victory, that he has continued to struggle and continued to win—"

"The hero must be strong, more than human, and when he becomes King, his struggles should be over. *That* is the end of the story. That is the law of stories, Perrin, however else the rest of us must live. If people saw him any differently—some spirit would go out of the world, I think. People would believe in him less." I sit back

"I SEE A THOUSAND GOBLIN WARRIORS THROWING THEMSELVES AGAINST THE BURNING RAMPARTS OF THE CITY."

hands resting on a worn blanket. Evrad is also old, but he wears his age, his gray, and his wrinkles like a prize. He still rides out, straight as a statue in the saddle, and I still wait for him.

Behind me, a door opens and closes softly. Our youngest son, Perrin, attempts to not disturb me. I don't have to look; I am my father's daughter, and I have acquired some of his sight over the years. My father is long dead.

Perrin comes to my chair and kneels on the rug. This puts him at the height he was as a boy. I look on him as if he is a boy come to beg a favor. But he is a man, with a beard and his father's bold eyes.

"Mother? I've almost finished. But I have one last question."

My other children have become warriors, diplomats, husbands, wives, parents, leaders, and healers. Perrin, while he dutifully learned swordplay and manners along with his siblings, has become none of these. He is a scholar, historian, chronicler. A bard.

He has been writing an account of the great War of the Fortress and the turning of the age. I've read parts of it—what he has been fit to show me—and hardly recognize the events and trials I lived through. It reads like the old stories.

"Oh?" I say. "Why not just invent an answer? It won't sound any more outlandish than what's there already."

"I've written no lies—"

"No, of course not. But you've painted the truth with bold colors, indeed." Gah, that's something my father might have said.

He looks away, smirking. Like I might have done, kneeling at my father's chair. "I have a question about a thing I am not sure even happened."

He paused, wincing in difficult thought, trying to speak—my son the bard, tongue tied. I might have laughed, but he looked to be in pain. Finally, he said.

"When I was young, quite small, a noise woke me, and I was afraid. I thought to go to your chamber to seek comfort. The passages were very dark. I crept along the walls like a mouse, fearful of losing my way in my own home. Then, I heard crying. I turned a corner and saw a lantern. In the circle of light I saw you and Father sitting on the floor. You held him in your arms, and he was crying. I thought his heart would break. And I realized—he was afraid of something, more afraid than I was or had ever been. That sight terrified me. I ran back to my own bed. I trembled under my blankets until dawn, and never spoke of it until now.

"Tell me: what I saw—was it real? Did it happen?"

Evrad and I have even managed to keep our troubles from our children. Mostly. He walks in his sleep rarely these days. No reason anyone should know.

Yes. It happened that night and many others. The horrors of that war have haunted him for many years. It may be that the enemy left him with such visions as revenge, as a final defiance. Or perhaps it is the price for victory." I shake my head. I have invented many excuses, but the simplest is probably the truest: his memory haunts him, and there is no one to blame.

I lean forward and rest my hand on Perrin's shoulder. "You must not write of this. You must not add this to your chronicle."

and take a tired breath.

"Believe in him less because he is human?"

"Just so."

I watch Perrin thinking. As a child, his questions went on longer than any of the others' did. He was the one who wanted to know why different birds had different songs, and why water could not flow uphill. He exhausted my ability to make answers. Even now, I hope he has no more questions.

"I understand, I think," he says at last. "The war ends, the age ends, the story ends."

"So the children can make their own stories."

He nods, and wonder of wonders I think he does understand. "One more question," he says, and I brace. "Which was harder? The battles leading into the new age, or the ones after?"

Strange. Looking back now, I only remember the ones after. The ones before happened to someone else, in another age.

I click my tongue and think of what my father might have said. "That's not a fair question. It doesn't matter which is harder, because no one will ever know of the battles after."

Shadows writhe across the floor and climb to the ceiling. They swim around the bed and my sleeping lord. One is like a laughing mouth, another like a reaching hand that touches the slope of his shoulder.

"Get away from him." I have drunk too much wine and my vision is spinning. I throw the cup. Wine flies in a spray of droplets across the floor. The silver cup drops with a ringing noise. The sound of swords striking or inhuman teeth gnashing in a cry of victory.

"He is mine!" I cry, standing. "You cannot have him."

Blood rushes in my ears like laughter. I want to scream, I open my mouth to scream, and then—

"Dear heart? What are you doing?" Sitting up, he rubs sleep from his eyes, his brow furrowed with curiosity.

"It's the light," I say in a fey mood. "You were right all along. The demons have come for us."

He searches the room, his eyes gold in the candle's glow. His face is calm, but he takes a trembling breath before saying, "It's only light. Come to bed."

"I must win you back. You fought a war and won. Now it's my turn. I will win you back!"

I clench my fists at my sides. My jaw trembles with an unsounded scream. My King watches me. Soon, the wrinkled brow eases, the tired face softens into a smile. To see him smile so, at night—but then, I must look amusing, in a rage, wine spilled around me, shift falling off my shoulders.

He says, simply as grass in summer, "I know you will. Come to bed, love."

I go to him, wrap my arms around him and kiss him, deeply, longingly. His hands press against me, inviting and warm. So warm.

He pulls away for just a moment. "I know how to chase away the shadows," he says, and blows out the candle.

By Patrick Samphire
Illustration by Eric Westbrook

Dawn, by the Light of a Barrow Fire

I knew something was up as soon as I saw Frank trudge out of Bennett's trailer. Twenty years of working in mud and dust and dirt beside him meant I could read him the way he could read a pile of ancient bones. Anyway, something was always up when Bennett asked to see one of us.

This past year, since David died, had been hell, and working under Bennett had only made it worse. If the university department hadn't been so short of cash, we would have quit in a week. Instead, we had gritted our teeth, bowed our heads, and tried not to scream, praying for the next funding round.

Grief is the strongest human emotion. It can span the centuries and hide deep within the flesh, the blood, the bones, and the dirt.

Marcy straightened beside me and brushed her hair back with a muddy hand.

"I'll bet you a tenner at three-to-one Bennett's decided he wants a long barrow instead," she whispered.

"Do you think he knows what a long barrow is?"

Marcy, Frank, and I were the consultant archaeologists on this project, although Bennett did far more instructing than consulting. We were reconstructing a Neolithic settlement and round barrow for an English Heritage project—one of those projects where you're supposed to work using the same techniques that were used for the originals. In other words, it was pretty much guesswork from start to finish. We were the second team to work on this; Bennett had fired the previous team when they had refused to comply with one of his more ridiculous whims. We had avoided that fate so far, if only because we couldn't afford to lose the project.

The whole project was supposed to be for Ancient History Year. Only Ancient History Year was ancient history four months ago, and we still couldn't agree on a design for the huts. Frank and I were for the standard rectangular, thatched design, wooden posts at the corners, and stone walls, a single room centered around a hearth pit. Marcy was holding out for circular with a partitioned interior. We were all trying hard not to let Bennett have a say. He would probably want a two-up, two-down with a conservatory on the back.

Frank reached the top of the hill and collapsed into the bracken.

"Well?" Marcy said.

"He wants a trench."

I looked across the hillside, past the half-finished earth mound of the barrow, to the open moor of bracken and brambles. A hawk hovered in the blue air. There was nothing out there for miles. "Where? It's solid rock up here."

"He doesn't care." Frank said, wearily. "There's a TV crew coming. Apparently 'everyone knows archaeologists dig ditches,' so he wants one."

I groaned.

It rained most of the next day, a cold spring rain that threatened to turn to sleet several times. The water poured in rivers down the hillside, submerging the proto-trench we had started to dig in the valley where the ground was softer, and threatening to wash Bennett's trailer away. But no such luck.

By 3 o'clock, the rain had eased and Bennett sent us back to work, armed with a rusting pump. In minutes we were soaked and frozen. Thank God for students. We sent two of them into the deepest part of the trench to flail away with mattocks and shovels, while me and Marcy hunched over damp cigarettes. Frank was assiduously, and pointlessly, examining a pile of stones some distance from anything wet. Two minutes in the trench had been more than enough for him. No wonder. The whole thing was a charade. We had no reason to believe there had ever been a settlement in the valley. After all, who would want to live in a quagmire? And even if there had been, what did it have to do with building the barrow?

"Hey, look at this," one of the students shouted. He was crouched up to his waist in the brown water of the trench. I pushed myself up. Mud squelched beneath me. No doubt some innocent flint was being mistaken for an axe head again.

"He's found an ancient plastic cup," Marcy whispered, and I covered a grin.

He hadn't.

He'd found a bone.

He was waving it around, spraying water in his excitement.

Frank came wandering over and relieved the student of his find. "It's definitely human," he said, turning the brown bone in his hands. "A tibia, probably from a juvenile. Pretty old, I'd say."

A child. A cold stone dropped into my belly. I pushed past the others and dropped to my knees, scrabbling about in the lowering water.

Within moments my hands caught on something hard and curved. I pulled it free from the dirt, not caring that I might be damaging it. I knew it was a skull the moment I touched it, but I didn't admit it to myself until I had it out of the water. It was small. I turned it in my hand. Most of the left side was missing. Smashed away.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you OK?" Marcy asked. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"We should do this properly," she said. "Come on. Leave it to Frank and the students."

I followed her out of the trench. I was starting to shiver. Maybe it was the cold water.

A child. David had only been a child, just nine years old. My son. A boy chasing his ball. The car hadn't even stopped.

Marcy sat me down on a stone as the sun emerged from the black clouds. My knees were weak.

I sat and watched them uncover the skeleton, a bone at a time. The skeleton of some poor dead child. Maybe one who had been chasing his ball. Then a car hit him leaving a hole like a fist in his skull.

No. I shook my head to clear the memories. These bones were too old. They weren't David. David's ashes were scattered across the field behind my house. No one had scattered this child's ashes. No one had buried him.

"I'm OK," I said to Marcy, getting to my feet. "I'll be fine." I'd dealt with David dying. But it would be the anniversary of his death in three days, so it was natural that I should be thinking about him. It had been a moment of shocked memory, that was all.

"I'm going to carbon-date the bones," Frank said, looking up as we approached. "I'd bet they're at least a couple of thousand years old." He showed us one of the bones. "Look, they're in pretty good condition. We might be able to get some DNA."

I nodded, trying not to feel queasy.

A loud tooting made us all turn. A van had pulled off the road near the trailers.

"That'll be the TV," Frank said. "Last chance to hide."

I tried to smile, but it came out like a grimace. Like a skull.

The back doors of the van opened. Two men emerged carrying a film camera and microphone. A third man, wearing a flying jacket and dark sunglasses and carrying a clipboard, got out on the passenger's side. The wet ground had begun to steam slightly in the hot sun. I was still cold.

"Into the bunker," Frank called.

"Hush," Marcy said. "They're coming over."

I was feeling sick, and weak, as though I hadn't eaten for days.

"You must be Bennett," the man in the flying jacket said when he reached us, extending a hand to Frank.

Frank started to choke.

Marcy stepped forward quickly. "I'm Marcy Raney. The comedian is Frank. The cute one is Cameron." She pointed at Frank then me. "What do you want to film?"

"Any swords, armor, stuff that'll look good on TV," Flying Jacket said. "No rocks though. People don't like watching rocks."

Marcy stared at him for a moment, then, "You know this is a Neolithic project?"

"Cool."

"You do know what Neolithic means?"

Flying Jacket frowned. "Huh? Yeah, yeah, of course."

"It means Stone Age."

Flying Jacket frowned. "So no swords?"

My head was throbbing. All I could see was David's body, lying by the side of the road, bleeding. I was choking.

"You're not from the BBC, are you?" Marcy said.

"Satellite," Frank whispered.

"Hey," the cameramen called. "They've got a skull over here."

"All right!" Flying Jacket shouted. "Let's get—"

"Leave the fucking skull alone!" They all turned to look at me. "Just … just … leave it alone." I remembered the journalists when David was killed. Wanting to see his room, his clothes, his photos. Hanging around outside the house, night and day, pointing their cameras. It had been a politician's car. It hadn't stopped.

"You OK?" Marcy whispered.

I nodded. "Just don't touch it," I said to the TV crew. "It's … it's not been catalogued yet." It was pretty lame, and we all knew it. Maybe even the TV crew knew it.

I walked away.

He has 17 scars on his chest. His son has only three. The boy is young. Too young to be out alone at night when there are bears and wolves around.

He walks from his hut to the barrow. The boy has too great an interest in the barrow. Maybe he will be there.

The ancestor-bones are bright in the sky tonight. The ground is white and the trees are flat against the sky. It is not a good night. Spirits can see too easily on a night like this.

He grasps the bones around his neck and hears them click together. *Protect me,* he thinks.

He wants to call out for the boy, but he does not want the spirits to hear. Nor the other men. They will think him a woman for worrying about the boy.

I have the soul of a bear, he thinks. He wears its teeth sewn into the hides of his cloak. *I fear nothing.*

The boy is not at the barrow.

I awoke from the dream, shaking. It had been cold, and my son had been lost near the barrow. David had been lost. I had been looking for him. But that hadn't been me, had it?

Dawn was close.

I got to the site early, when the mists still cloaked the hills and turned the barrow into a ghost floating above the ground. We were going to try to place the capstone on top of the barrow today, before covering it with a final layer of earth. We, and several dozen volunteers, would haul the 10-ton block of granite up the slope of earth that made up the side of the barrow and drop it onto the upright support stones, sealing the barrow. We were leaving part of one side and the entrance clear so visitors could see how it was constructed, and compare it to the quoits that dotted the landscape hereabouts. We would do the same with some of the huts, if we ever built the damn things.

"I knew you'd be here."

"Talk," she said. I shook my head against her shirt. Talking would only hurt more. Better to bury the hurt, like ashes in a barrow.

Eventually she pushed me away and wiped my eyes with a corner of her scarf.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm OK."

Marcy gave me a sad grin. I knew she didn't believe me. Hell, even I didn't believe me.

Someone shouted, "Hey," from down the hill. We turned to see Frank.

"I thought I'd find you two canoodling up here," he said.

The mist must have been killing the sounds of cars. There could have been a convoy down there.

"It's a morning for early mornings," I said.

"It's not an early morning," Frank said. "It's a late night. I spent the night in the trailer studying the bones." He looked at me. "I figured you'd want to know."

"And?" My voice caught on the word and I had to repeat it. "And?"

"It's pretty hard to know without getting them into a lab, and even then ..."

"Guess," I said.

Frank shot a glance at Marcy, then shrugged. "A young boy, probably between 7 and 12 or so. It's difficult to tell until we know exactly when the bones are from. People's development rates have changed over time. I would guess they're late Neolithic, but that really is a guess until I get the carbon-dating results."

"What killed him?"

"THE BOY. MY SON. HE IS GONE. I FEAR HE IS DEAD. THE BOY HAS NO FEAR."

I turned. Marcy was climbing the hill behind me. I hadn't heard her car approach.

"Couldn't sleep, huh?"

"No," I said. "You?"

"I was worried about you. Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

She slipped her arm through mine.

"You'll make the students jealous," I said. Students always had a crush on Marcy. I could understand that.

She smiled sadly. "Students don't get up this early. Nor do you."

The sky overhead was a pale blue, almost white. The bracken and heather and brambles were speckled with dew. Spiders' webs bowed under the weight of drops of water.

"It's stupid," I said. "It really shouldn't have got to me. I'm over it." I shook my head. "I guess I was tired."

"Bullshit," Marcy said. She grabbed my arm so I had to turn to face her or I would have jerked my arm away. "You're not over it, Cam, and you've never been over it. You've never talked about it. You've just bottled it up as though that'll make it go away. Well it won't." She took a breath and glared into my eyes. "Shit, why do you think Alice left you? You never even talked to her."

I recoiled. Marcy never held back, but she'd never thrown that at me before. My face reddened and I started to turn away.

"Cameron ..." she said. She tugged my arm. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. "I'm sorry," she said. "Just ... just talk to someone, Cameron. If you can't talk to me or Frank, talk to a doctor."

"I don't need to talk," I said. My throat was so tight it hurt to speak.

She pulled me around and to her. I resisted for just a moment, then rested my forehead on her shoulder. Tears were cold on my cheeks. "I don't know what to do," I whispered into her rough hair.

Frank grimaced. "It could have been anything ..."

My heart hammered. My mouth was as dry as sand.

"The head?" I croaked.

"Yes, it could have been the head wound. Maybe a blow from a weapon, or an animal, or maybe just an accident. We'll never know." He shrugged again. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK." I turned away. My chest was tight and I couldn't get enough air. "It's OK."

The capstone got stuck halfway up the slope of the barrow when the rollers sank into the soft earth. Bennett suggested using a crane, but apart from the fact that we didn't have one, that would rather have destroyed the point of the exercise.

I stood with Marcy and Frank on top of the barrow, just above the gaping burial chamber, and we scratched our chins, three bruise-eyed, tired archaeologists whose theories had just collapsed.

"Bigger rollers," Frank said.

"Tougher volunteers," Marcy said.

"Planks," I said.

We didn't have a clue.

The frost is hard on the ground. The cold bites into my skin. It is dark, but the moon is bright. I am standing in the shadows of a hut. It is round, with stone walls sealed with dried mud, or perhaps dung. The thatching protrudes almost to the ground, and the roof is steep. The door is a thick fur. From here the dwelling appears to be sunk into the ground. It looks like Marcy's design for the Neolithic huts, apart from the roof.

Where the hell am I? It reminds me of my dream, but it seems too real for a dream.

Continued on page 96

By Robert Silverberg
Illustration by Web Bryant

It Comes and Goes

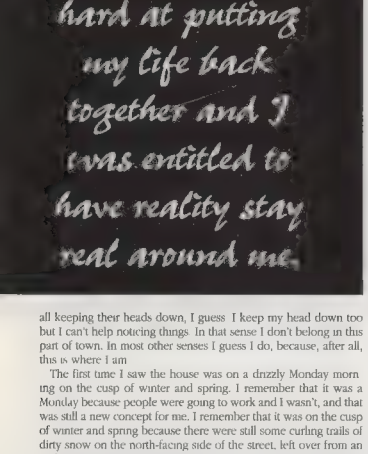
The house comes and goes, comes and goes, and no one seems to know or to care. It's that kind of neighborhood. You keep your head down; you take notice only of the things that are relevant to your own personal welfare; you screen everything else out as irrelevant or meaningless or potentially threatening.

It's a very ordinary house, 30 or 40 years old, a cheap one-story white-stucco job on a corner lot, maybe six rooms: green shutters on the windows, a scruffy lawn, a narrow, badly paved path running from the street to the front steps. There's a screen door in front of the regular one. To the right and left of the doorway is some unkempt shrubbery with odds and ends of rusting junk scattered among it—a garbage can, an old barbecue outfit, stuff like that.

WHEN YOU'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE, WHAT'S TO KEEP YOU FROM RISKING IT ALL?

All the houses around here look much the same way: there isn't a lot of architectural variety in this neighborhood. Just rows of ordinary little houses adding up to a really ordinary kind of place, neither a slum nor anything desirable, aging houses inhabited by stranded people who can't move upward and who are settled enough so that they've stopped slipping down. Even the street names are stereotyped small-town standards, instantly forgettable- Maple, Oak, Spruce, Pine. It's hard to tell one street from another, and usually there's no reason why you should. You're able to recognize that your own, and the others, except for Walnut Street where the shops are, are just filler. I know how to get to the white house with the screen door from my place—turn right, down to the corner and right again, diagonal left across the street—but even now I couldn't tell you whether it's on Spruce corner of Oak or Pine corner of Maple. I just know how to get there.

The house will stay here for five or six days at a time and then one morning I'll come out and the lot will be vacant, and so it remains for 10 days or two weeks. And then there it is again. You'd think people would notice that, you'd think they'd talk; but they're



all keeping their heads down, I guess. I keep my head down too but I can't help noticing things. In that sense I don't belong in this part of town. In most other senses I guess I do, because, after all, this is where I am.

The first time I saw the house was on a drizzly Monday morning on the cusp of winter and spring. I remember that it was a Monday because people were going to work and I wasn't, and that was still a new concept for me. I remember that it was on the cusp of winter and spring because there were still some curling trails of dirty snow on the north-facing side of the street, left over from an early-March storm, but the forsythias and crocuses were blooming in the gardens on the south-facing side. I was walking down to the grocery on Walnut Street to pick up the morning paper. Daily walking, rain or shine, is very important to me; it's part of my recovery regime; and I was going for the paper because I was still into studying the help-wanted ads at that time. As I made my way down Spruce Street (or maybe it was Pine Street) some movement in a doorway across the way caught my eye and I glanced up and over.

A flash of flesh, it was.

A woman, turning in the open doorway.

A naked woman, so it seemed. I had just a quick side glimpse, fuzzed and blurred by the screen door and the gray light of the cloudy morning, but I was sure I saw gleaming golden flesh: a bare shoulder, a sinuous hip, a long stretch of haunch and thigh and butt and calf, maybe a bit of bright pubic fleece also. And then she was gone, leaving incandescent tracks on my mind.

I stopped right on a dime and stood staring toward the darkness of the doorway, waiting to see if she'd reappear. Hoping that she would. Praying that she would, actually. It wasn't because I was in such desperate need of a free show but because I wanted her to have been real. Not simply an hallucination. I was sober that morning and had been for a month and a half, ever since the 7th of February, and I didn't want to think that I was still having hallucinations.

The doorway stayed dark. She didn't reappear.

Of course not. She couldn't reappear because she had never been there in the first place. What I had seen was an illusion. How could she possibly have been real? Real women around here don't flash their bare butts in front doorways at 9 in the morning on cold drizzly days, and they don't have hips and thighs and legs like that.

But I let myself off the hook. After all, I was sober. Why borrow trouble? It had been a trick of the light, I told myself. Or maybe, maybe a curious fluke of my weary, overwrought mind. An odd mental prank. But in any case nothing to take seriously, nothing symptomatic of significant cerebral decline and collapse.

I went on down to the Walnut Street Grocery and bought that morning's *Post Star* and looked through the classified ads for the one that said, *If you are an intelligent, capable, hard working human being who has gone through a bad time but is now in recovery and looking to make a comeback in the great game of life, we have just the job for you.* It wasn't there. Somehow it never was.

On my way home I thought I'd give the white house on the corner lot a second glance, just in case something else of interest was showing. The house wasn't there either.

My name is Tom and I am an alcoholic.

My name is Tom and I am an alcoholic.

My name is Tom and I am an alcoholic.

I tell you that three times because what I tell you three times is true. If anything at all is true about me, that much is. It is also true that I am 40 years old, that I have had successful careers in advertising, public relations, mail-order promotion, and several other word-oriented professions. Each of those successful careers came to an unsuccessful end. I have written three novels and a bunch of short stories, too. And between the ages of 16 and 39 I consumed a quantity of brandy, scotch, bourbon, sherry, rum, and beer—and so on down to Cherry Kijafa, Triple Sec, and gin fizzes—that normal people would find very hard to believe. I suppose I would have gone on to rubbing alcohol and antifreeze if nothing else had been available. On my 40th birthday I finally took the necessary step, which was to admit that alcohol was a monster too strong for me to grapple with and my life had become unmanageable as a result. And that I was willing to turn to a Power that is stronger than I am, stronger even than the booze monster, and humbly ask that Power to restore me to sanity and help me defend myself against my enemy.

I live now in a small furnished room in a small town so dull you can't remember the names of the streets. I belong to the Program

and I go to meetings three or four times a week and I tell people whose surnames I don't know about my faults, which I freely admit, and my virtues, which I do have, and about my one great weakness And then they tell me about theirs

My name is Tom and I am an alcoholic

I've been doing pretty well since the 7th of February

Hallucinations were one thing I didn't need in this time of recovery I had already had my share

I didn't realize at that point that the house had vanished. People don't customarily think in terms of houses vanishing, not if their heads are screwed on right, and as I have just pointed out I had a vested interest in believing that as of the 7th of February my head was screwed on right and it was going to stay that way

No, what I thought was simply that I must have gone to the grocery by way of one street and come home by way of another Since I was sober and had been for a month and a half, there was no other rational explanation

I went home and made some phone calls to potential employers, with the usual result I watched some television. If you've never stayed home on a weekday morning you can't imagine what television is like at that time of day, most of it. After a while I found myself tuning to the home shopping channel for the sheer excitement of it

I thought about the flash of flesh in the screen doorway

I thought about the color of the label on a bottle of Johnny Walker, too You don't ever stop thinking about things like that, the look of labels and bottlecaps and the shape of bottles and the taste of what's inside and the effect that it has You may stop using the product but you don't banish it from your mind, quite the contrary, and when you aren't thinking about the flavor or the effect you're thinking about weird peripheral things like the look of the label Believe me, you are

It rained for three or four days, miserable nonstop rain, and I didn't do much of anything Then finally I went outdoors again, a night and a night and look across to the left, and there was the white house, very bright in the spring sunshine Very casually I glanced over at it No flashes of flesh this time

I saw something much stranger, though A rolled-up copy of the morning paper was lying on the lawn of a house with brown shingles next door. A dog was sniffing around it, a goofy faced nondescript white mutt with long legs and a black head. Abruptly the dog scooped the paper up in its jaws, as dogs will do, and turned and trotted around to the front of the white house

The screen door opened a little way I didn't see anybody opening it. It remained ajar The wooden door behind it seemed to be open also

The dog stood there, looking around, shaking its head from side to side. It seemed bewildered As I watched, it dropped the paper and began to pant, its tongue hanging out as if this were the middle of July and not the end of March. Then it picked the paper up again, bending for it in an oddly rigid, robotic way It raised its head and turned and stared right at me, almost as though it was asking me to help it Its eyes were glassy and its ears were standing up and twitching. Its back was arched like a cat's. Its tail rose straight up behind it. I heard low rusty-sounding growls

Then, abruptly, it visibly relaxed It lowered its ears and a look of something like relief came into its eyes and its posture became a good old droopy dog-posture again It wriggled its shoulders almost playfully Wagged its tail And went galloping through the open screen door, bounding and prancing in that dumb doggy way that they have, holding the newspaper high The door closed behind it

I stayed around for a little while The door stayed closed The dog didn't come out

I wondered which I would rather believe that I had seen a door open itself and let a dog in, or that I had imagined I had seen a door open itself and let a dog in?

Then there was the cat event. This was a day or two later

The cat was a lop-eared ginger tom. I had seen it around before I like cats I liked this one especially He was a survivor, a street-smart guy I hoped to learn a thing or two from him

He was on the lawn of the white house The screen door was ajar again The cat was staring toward it and he looked absolutely outraged

His fur was standing out half a mile and his tail was lashing like a whip and his ears were flattened back against his head. He was hissing and growling at the same time, and the growl was that eerie banshee moan that reminds you what jungle creatures cats still are He was quivering as if he had electrodes in him. I saw muscles violently rippling along his flanks and great convulsive shivers running the length of his spine

"Hey, easy does it, fellow!" I told him "What's the matter? What's the matter, guy?"

What the matter was was that his legs seemed to want to move toward the house and his brain didn't He was struggling every step of the way The house was calling him, I thought suddenly, astonishing myself with the idea As it had called the dog. You call a dog long enough and eventually his dog instincts take command and he comes, whether he feels like it or not. But you can't make a cat do a fucking thing against its will, not without a struggle. There was a struggle going on now. I stood there and watched it and I felt real uneasiness

The cat lost

He fought with truly desperate fury, but he kept moving closer to the door all the same He managed to hold back for a moment just as he reached the first step, and I thought he was going to succeed in breaking loose from whatever was pulling him But then his muscles stopped quivering and his fur went back where it belonged and his whole body perceptibly slackened, and he crept across the threshold in a pathetically beaten-looking way

At my meeting that night I wanted to ask the others whether they knew anything about the white house with the screen door They had all grown up in this place, I had lived here only a couple of months Maybe the white house had a reputation for weirdness But I wasn't sure which street it was on and a round faced man named Eddie had had a close escape from the bottle after an ugly fight with his wife and needed to talk about that, and when that was over we all sat around the table and discussed the high school basketball playoffs High school basketball is a very big thing in this part of the state. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to say, "Do you mind if I change the subject, fellows? Because I saw a house a few blocks from here gobble up a dog and then a cat like it was a roach motel." They'd just think I had gone back on the sauce and they'd rally round like crazy to help me get steady again

I went back there a few days later and couldn't find the house. Just an empty lot, grizzled brown late-winter grass, no paved pathway, no steps, no garbage cans, nothing. This time I knew I hadn't accidentally gone up some other street. The house next door to the white house was still there, the brown-shingled one where the dog had found the newspaper. But the white house was gone.

What the hell? A house that comes and goes?

Sweat came flooding out all over me. Was it possible to be having hallucinations in such convincing detail when I had been sober for a couple of months? First I was frightened and then I was angry. I didn't deserve this. If the house wasn't a hallucination, and I didn't seriously think it was, then what was it? I was working hard at putting my life back together and I was entitled to have reality stay real around me.

Easy, I thought. Easy. You're not entitled to anything, fellow. But you'll be OK as long as you recognize that nobody requires you to be able to explain mysteries that are beyond your understanding. Just go easy, take things as they come, and stay cool, stay cool, stay cool.

The house came back four days later.

I still couldn't bring myself to talk about it at meetings, even though that probably would have been a good idea. I had no problem at all with admitting publicly that I was an alcoholic, far from it. But standing up and telling everyone that I was crazy was something else entirely.

Things got even more bizarre. One afternoon I was out in front of the house and a kid's tricycle came rolling down the street all by itself, as though on an invisible cord. It rolled right past me and turned the corner and I watched it traverse the path and go up the steps of the white house and disappear inside. Some sort of magnetic pull? Radio waves?

Half a minute later the owner of the tricycle came huffing along, a chubby boy of about five in blue leggings. "My bike!" he was yelling. "My bike!" I imagined him running up the path and disappearing into the house too, like the dog, the cat, and the tricycle. I couldn't let that happen. But I couldn't just grab him up and hold him, either, not in an era when if a grown man simply smiles at a kid in the street he's likely to get booked. So I did the next best thing and planted myself at the head of the path leading across the white house's lawn. The kid banged into my shins and fell down. I looked up the block and saw a woman coming, his aunt, maybe, or his grandmother. It seemed safe to help the kid up, so I did. Then I smiled at her and said, "He really ought to look where he's going."

"My bike!" the boy wailed. "Where's my bike?"

The woman looked at me and said, "Did you see someone take the child's tricycle?"

"Afraid I can't say, ma'am," I replied, shrugging my most amiable shrug. "I was coming around the corner, and there was the boy running full tilt into me. But I didn't see any tricycles." What else was I going to tell her? I saw it go up the steps by itself and into the house?

She gave me a troubled glance. But obviously I didn't have the tricycle in my coat pocket and I guess I don't look like the sort of man who specializes in stealing things from little children.

A dog. A cat. A tricycle.

I turned and walked away. Up Maple to Juniper, and down Juniper to Beech, and left on Beech onto Chestnut. Or maybe it was up Oak to Sycamore and then on to Locust and Hickory. Maple, Oak, Chestnut, Hickory: what difference did it make? They were all alike.

I doubled back eventually and got to the house just in time to see a boy of about 14 wearing a green-and-yellow jersey come trotting down the street, tossing a football from hand to hand. As he went past the white house the screen door swung open and the inner door swung back and the kid halted, turned, and very neatly threw the football through, a nice high tight arc.

The doors closed.

The kid stood stock-still in the street, staring at his hand as though he had never seen it before. He looked stunned.

Then after a moment he broke out of his stasis and started up the path to the house. I wanted to call out to him to keep away, but I couldn't get any sound out; and I wasn't sure what I could say to him, anyway.

He rang the doorbell. Waited.

I held my breath.

The door started to open again. Trying to warn him, I managed to make a scratchy little choking sort of sound.

But the kid didn't go in. He stood for a moment peering inside and then he turned and began to run, across the lawn, over the hedges, down the street.

What had he seen?

I ran after him. "Hey, kid! Kid, wait!"

He was going so fast I couldn't believe it. I was a pretty good runner in my time, too. But my time was some time ago.

Instead of going to the meeting that night, I went to scout out the house. Under cover of darkness I crept around it in the shrubbery like your basic peeping Tom, trying to peer through the windows.

Was I scared? Utterly shitless, yes. Wouldn't you be?

Did I want a drink? Don't be naive. I always want a drink, and not just one. I certainly wanted a good jolt of the stuff now. Three fingers of Jim Beam and I'd have had the unshakeable *savoir faire* of Sherlock Holmes himself. But I wouldn't have stopped at three fingers. My name is Tom and I am an alcoholic.

What did I see? I saw a woman, very likely the same one I had had that quick glimpse of in the doorway that first drizzly Monday morning. I got only quick glimpses now. She was moving around from room to room so that I didn't have a chance to see her clearly, but what I saw was plenty impressive. Tall, blonde, sleek, that much was certain. She wore a floor-length red robe made of some glossy metallic fabric that fell about her in a kind of liquid shimmer. Her movements were graceful and elegant. There didn't seem to be anything in the way of furniture inside, just some cartons and crates, which she was carrying back and forth. Stranger and stranger. I didn't see the cat or the dog or the tricycle.

I scrabbled around from window to window for maybe half an hour, hoping for a good look at her. I was moving with what I thought was real skill, keeping low, staying down behind the lilacs or whatever, rising cautiously toward window sill level for each quick peek. I suppose I might have been visible from the street, but the night was moonless and people don't generally go out strolling around here after dark.

There didn't appear to be anyone else in the house. And for about

15 minutes I didn t see her either. Maybe she was in the shower, maybe she had gone to bed. I was tempted to ring the bell. But what for? What would I say to her if she answered? What was I doing here in the first place?

I crept backward through the shrubbery, thinking it was time to leave. And then there she was, framed in a window, looking straight out at me.

Smiling. Beckoning.

Come hither, Tommy boy.

I thought about the cat. I thought about the dog. I began to shake. Like the kid with the football. I turned and ran, desperately loping through the quiet streets in an overwhelming excess of unreasoning terror.

I was getting to the point where I thought it might be calming to have a drink. In the old days the first drink always settled me down. It lifted the burden, it soothed the pain, it answered the questions. It made taking the second drink very easy. The second suggested the third, the third required the fourth, the fourth demanded the fifth, and so on without hindrance, right on to insomnia, vomiting, failing hair, bloody gums, raw eyes, exploding capillaries, nightmares, hallucinations, impotence, the shakes, the shivers, the queebles, the collywobbles, and all the rest.

I didn't take the drink. I went to a meeting instead, jittery and perplexed. I said I was wrestling with a mystery. I didn't say what it was. Let them fill in the blanks, anything they felt like. Even without the details, they'd know something of what I was going through. They too were wrestling with mysteries. Otherwise what were they doing there?

The house was gone for two weeks. I checked for it every day. Spring had arrived in full force before it returned. Trees turned green, plants were blooming, the air grew warm and soft.

The woman was back too, the blonde. I never failed to see her now, every time I went by, and I went by every day. It was as if she knew I was coming. Sometimes she was at the window, but more usually she was standing just inside the screen door. Some days she dressed in the red slinky robe, some days in a green one. She had a few other outfits too, all of them classy but somewhat oddly designed, shoulders too wide, the cut too narrow. Once—incredibly, unforgettably—she came to the door in nothing at all but a pair of stockings, and stood for a long moment on splendid display, framed perfectly in the doorway, sunlight glinting off her lush lovely body.

She was always smiling. She must have known I was the one who had been peeping that night and it didn't seem to bother her. The look on her face said, *Let's get to know each other a little better shall we?* Always that warm, beckoning smile. Sometimes she'd give me a little come-on-in flick of her fingertips.

Not on your life, sister. Not on your life.

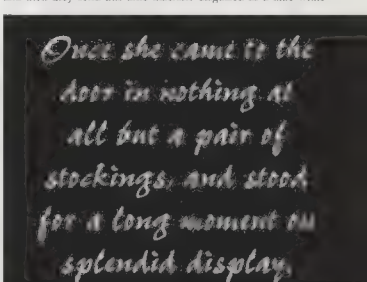
But I couldn't stop coming by. The house, the woman, the mystery, all pulled me like a magnet.

By now I had two theories. The simple one was that she was lonely, horny, bored, looking for distraction. Maybe it excited her to be playing these games with me. In this quiet little town where the chief cause of death surely must be boredom, she liked to live dangerously.

Too simple, much too simple. Why would a woman who looked like that be living a lonely, horny life? Why would she be in this kind of town in the first place? What was more important, the theory didn't account for the comings and goings of the house. Or for what I had seen happen to the cat, the dog, the tricycle, the boy with the football. The dog had returned—he was sitting crosslegged on the steps just below the screen door the day I was given the full frontal show—but he never went more than a couple of yards from the house and he moved in a weird lobotomized way. There hadn't been any further sign of the cat or the tricycle.

Which led to my other theory, the roach-motel theory.

The house comes from the future, I told myself. They're studying the late 20th century and they want to collect artifacts. So every now and then they send this time machine disguised as a little white-



stucco house here and it scoops up toys, pets, newspapers, whatever it can grab. Most likely they aren't really looking for cats or dogs, but they takes what they gets. And now they're trying to catch an actual live 20th-century man. Trolling for him the way you'd troll for catfish, using a beautiful woman—sometimes naked—as the bait.

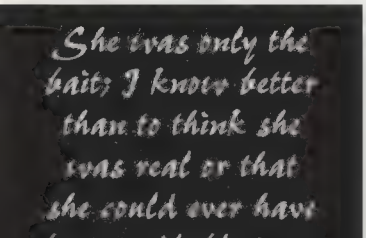
A crazy idea? Sure. But I couldn't come up with a saner one.

Ten days into springtime and the house was gone again. When it came back, about a week later, the woman didn't seem to be with it. They were giving her some time off, maybe. But they still seemed interested in luring me inside. I'd come by and take up my position by the curb and the door would quietly swing open, though no one was visible inside. And would stay open, waiting for me to traipse up the walk and go in.

It was a temptation. I felt it pulling on me harder and harder every day, as my own here-and-now real-life everyday options looked bleaker and bleaker. I wasn't finding a new job. I wasn't making useful contacts. My money, not much to begin with, was running out. All I had was the Program and the people who were part of it here, and though they were fine enough people they weren't the kind I could get really close to in any way not having to do with the Program.

So why not go up that path and into the house? Even if they swept me up and took me off to the year 2999 and I was never heard from

again, what did I have to lose? A drab life in a furnished room in a nowhere town, living on the last of my dwindling savings while I dreamed of fifths of Johnny Walker and went to meetings at which a bunch of victims of the same miserable malady struggled constantly to keep their leaky boats from sinking? Wherever I went would be better than that. Perhaps incredibly better.



But of course I didn't know that the shining visitors from the future would sweep me off to an astounding new existence in the year 2999. That was only my own nutty guess, my wild fantasy. Anything at all might happen to me if I passed through that doorway. Anything. It was a kind of Russian roulette and I didn't even know the odds against me.

One day I taped a piece of paper to a rubber ball from the five-and-dime and tossed it through the door when it opened for me. On it I had written these questions:

WHO ARE YOU?
WHERE ARE YOU FROM?
WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?
DO YOU WANT ME?
WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?
WILL YOU HARM ME?

And I waited for an answering note to come bouncing out. But none ever did.

The house went away. The house came back. The woman still wasn't there. Nobody else seemed to be, either. But the door swung expectantly open for me, seemingly of its own accord. I would stand and stare, making no move, and after a time it would close again.

I bought another rubber ball and threw another message inside:

SEND ME THE GIRL AGAIN. THE BLONDE ONE.
I WANT TO TALK TO HER.

The house went away again and stayed away a long while, nearly a month this time, so that I began to think it would never come back and then that it had never actually been here at all. There were days when I didn't even bother to walk past the vacant lot where I had seen it.

Then I did, and it was there, and the woman was in the doorway smiling, and she said, "Come on in and visit me, sailor?"

She was wearing something gauzy and she was leaning against the door-frame with her hand on her hip. Her voice was a soft throaty contralto. It all felt like a scene out of a 1940's movie. Maybe it was; maybe they'd been studying up.

"First you tell me who you are, all right? And where you come from."

Don't you want to have a good time with me, pal?"

Damn right I do. I felt it in my groin, my pounding chest, my knees.

I moistened my lips. I thought of the way the house had reeled in that angry snarling cat. How it had pulled that tricycle up the stairs. I felt it pulling on me. But I must have more ability to fight back than a cat. Or a tricycle.

I said, "There's a lot I need to know, first."

"Come on in and I'll tell you everything," Softly. Huskily. Irresistibly. Almost irresistibly.

"Tell me first. Come out here and talk to me."

She winked and shook her head. "Here's looking at you, kid." Studying old movies, all right. She closed the door in my face.

What they hammer into you in the Program is that you may think you're pretty tough but in fact when you've added up all the debits and credits the truth is you aren't as strong as you like to pretend you are. You're too weak not to take the next drink, and it's only after you admit how weak you are and turn Elsewhere for help that you can begin to find the strength you need.

I had found that strength. I hadn't had a drink on the 7th of February, or on the 8th, or on the 9th. One day at a time. I wasn't having any drinks and by now that one day at a time had added up to 4 months and 11 days and when tomorrow came around I would add another day to the string, and I was beginning to feel fairly confident that I could keep going that way for the rest of my life.

But the house was something else again. I was starting to see it as a magic gateway to God knows where, just as booze had once been for me. It came and went and the woman smiled and beckoned and offered throaty invitations, and I recognized that I had let myself become obsessed with it and couldn't keep away from it, and the next time the house came back there was a good chance that I'd go sauntering up the path and through the door.

Which was crazy.

I hadn't put myself through this whole ordeal of recovery just for the sake of waltzing through a different magic gateway, had I? Especially when I didn't have the slightest idea of what might lie on the far side.

I thought about it and thought about it and thought about it and decided that the safest and smartest thing to do was to get out of here. I would move to some other town that didn't have houses that came and went, or languid naked blondes standing in doorways inviting me to step inside for a good time. So one drowsy July morning I bought a bus ticket to a town 40 miles from the one where I'd been living. It was about the same size and had a similar name and looked just about as dull; and on the street behind the lone movie theater I found a house with a FURNISHED ROOM sign stuck in its lawn and rented a place very much like the one I had, except that the rent was ten dollars more a month. Then I went around to the local A.A. headquarters—I had already checked with my own to

make sure they had one here, you can bet on that—and picked up the schedule of meeting hours

Done Safe A clean break

I'd never see that white house again

I'd never see her again

I'd never face that mysterious doorway and never feel the pull that it exerted

And as I told myself all that, the pain of irrevocable loss rose up inside me and hit me from within, and I thought I was going to fall down

I was in the bus depot then, waiting to catch the bus going back, so I could pack my suitcase and settle things with my landlady and say goodbye to my friends, such as they were, in the Program back there. I looked around and there she was, standing stark naked in the doorway of the baggage room, smiling at me in that beckoning way of hers

Not really It was a different woman, and she wasn't blonde, and she was wearing a bus company uniform, and she wasn't even looking at me

I knew that, actually. I wasn't hallucinating. But I had wanted her to be the other one so badly that I imagined that I saw her. And I realized how deep the obsession had become

I must have seen her 50 times during the ride back Waving at me from the head of a country lane as the bus flashed by Smiling at me from a bicycle going the other way Riding in the back of a pickup truck bouncing along in front of us. Standing by the side of the road trying to get a hitch Her image haunted me wherever I looked. I sat there shivering and sweating, seeing her beckoning in the doorway and watching that door closing and closing and closing again in my mind

It was evening by the time the bus reached town. The wise thing would have been to take a shower and go to a meeting, but I went to the house instead, and there was someone standing outside, staring at the screen door

I had never before encountered anyone else, in all my visits to the house

He was about my age, a short guy with a good gut and tousled reddish hair just beginning to fade into gray He looked vaguely familiar. I wondered if I had seen him at a meeting once or twice, perhaps. As I came by, he threw me an uneasy, guilty glance, as if he was up to something. His eyes were a pale blue, very bloodshot

I went past him about 10 paces, paused there, turned around

"You waiting for someone?" I asked

"I might be "

"Someone who lives in there?"

"What's that to you?"

"I was just wondering," I said. "If you could tell me who lives in that house "

He shrugged as if he hadn't quite heard me. The blue eyes turned chilly I wanted to pick him up and throw him into the next county The way he was looking at me, he probably felt the same way about me

I said, "A woman lives there, right?"

"Fuck off, will you?"

"A blonde woman?"

"Fuck off, I said "

Neither of us moved

"Sometimes I come by here and I see a blonde woman in the window, or standing in the doorway," I went on "I wonder if you've seen her sometimes too

He didn't say anything. His eyes flickered almost involuntarily toward the house

I followed the motion and there she was, visible through the window with the green shutters to the right of the door. She was wearing one of her misty wraps and her hair was shining like spun gold She smiled. Gestured with a quick movement of her head

Come on inside, why don't you?

I almost did Another five seconds, another three, and I would have trotted down that little narrow paved pathway as obediently as the dog who had had the newspaper in his mouth. But I didn't. I was still afraid of what might be beyond. I froze in my tracks, and then the redheaded man started to move He went past me and up the path Like a sleepwalker; like a zombie

"Hey wait -

I caught him by the arm He swung around, furious, and we struggled for a moment and then he broke loose and clamped both his hands on my shoulders and pushed me with tremendous force into the shrubbery I tripped over one of the pieces of odd metal junk that were always lying around near the door and went sprawling on my face, and when I got myself disentangled it was just in time to see the redheaded man wrench the screen door open and run inside

I heard the inner door slam

And then the house disappeared

It vanished like a pricked bubble, taking the shrubbery with it, the garbage cans and other junk as well, and I found myself kneeling on weeds in the midst of a vacant lot, trembling as if I had just had a stroke. After a moment or two I got shakily to my feet and walked over to the place where the house had been. Nothing. Nothing. No trace Gone as though it had never been there at all

A couple of days later I moved back to my old place There didn't seem much risk any more, and I missed the place, the town, the guys at the meetings. It's been months now, and no house. I rarely skip a day, going by the lot, but it remains empty. The memory of it, of her, haunts me. I look for the house in other parts of town, even in other towns I look for the redheaded man too, but I've never seen him. I described him once at a meeting and someone said, "Yeah, sounds like Ricky He used to live around here " Where was he now? Nobody had any idea Neither do I

Another time I got brave enough to ask some of them if they had ever heard about a little white house that, well, sort of comes and goes. "Comes and goes?" they said. "What the hell does that mean?" I let the question drop

I have a feeling that it was all some kind of a test, and I may have flunked it. I don't mean that I've missed out on a terrific woman She was only the bait; I know better than to think that she was real or that she ever could have been available for me if she was. But that sense of a new start—of another life, however weird, beyond the horizon, forever lost to me now—that's what I'm talking about. And the pain runs deep.

But there's always a second chance, isn't there? They tell you that in the Program, and I believe it. I have to. From time to time I've left notes in the empty lot

WHEN YOU COME BACK NEXT TIME, DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT ME

I'M READY NOW I'M SURE OF IT

Maybe they will. The house comes and goes, that I know It's gone now, but it'll come again I'm here. I'm watching I'm waiting.

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By Julie E. Czerneda

Luis Royo: The Art of Words

A science fiction writer gains her own work through an

As am I!

INSIGHTS INTO ARTIST'S IMAGINATION.

ABOVE: Royo captured the ominous atmosphere of this scene from A Thousand Words for Stranger *perfectly, as well as the main character's personality. Sira appears determined and resourceful, though in peril, and ready to act on her own.*

ABOVE Royo s swirling, not-quite-there approach to the structures in this scene from Ties of Power *(1999) gives a sense of another dimension, the tumultuous M'bir, that I hadn't thought possible*

RIGHT Esen s necklace and elongated fingers were critical details in Beholder s Eye *(1998)*

Our First Encounter

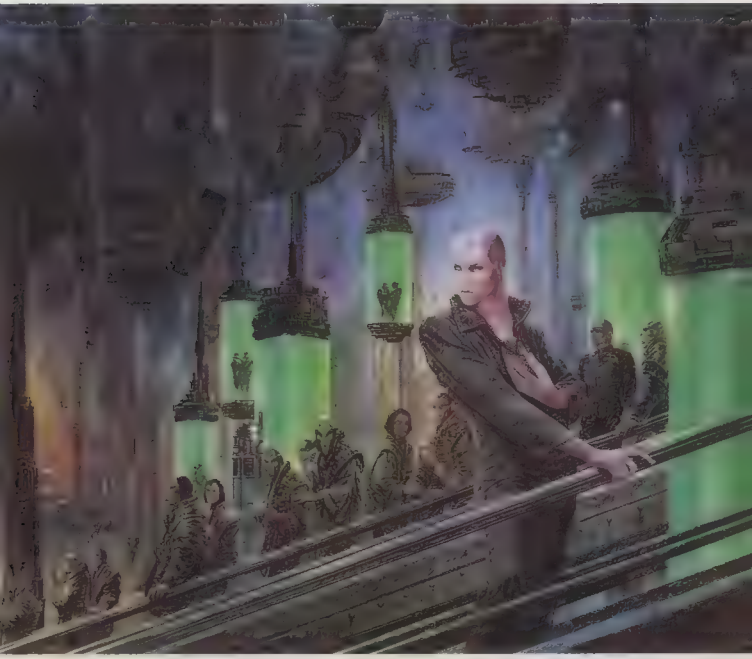
Luis Royo and I have never met, but I'll never forget my first encounter with him. As a new author I'd understood I'd have no choice as to the artist who would be doing the cover for my book, and definitely no input into the scene that would be selected. These weren't my areas of expertise and I was content. Really. OK, I remember assuring myself—frequently, if privately—that so long as there wasn't a buxom blonde in an open-to-vacuum spacesuit, I'd be happy.

What I saw when my editor sent me my first cover was an amazing work of art evocative, superbly crafted, and absolutely accurate to my story. For all my bravado, I'd cared more than I knew about what would be on the outside of my first novel. When I pulled Luis Royo's illustration out of the envelope, I shocked myself and my husband by bursting into tears. I had to—someone I'd never met or known before had created *this* from my words.

Across the Kilometers

Luis Royo lives in Spain. I live in Canada. More than an ocean separates us—neither of us speaks or reads the other's language. Yet, as Luis put it in one of our first pieces of correspondence (translated through the good graces of his agent and our publisher), "We connected across the kilometers." For that connection to work, communication has been the key, primarily between artist and editor. The choice of scene from each book and approval of the artwork, for example, rests with Sheila Gilbert of DAW, my editor. Before writing this article, I asked Sheila what she thought of working with Royo. She told me of being especially impressed by his receptiveness to ideas and his ability to produce a variety of approaches to a subject, as well as his fantastic settings.

Over time, Sheila has involved me more and more in her communications with Royo. From the beginning, I provided descriptive details about the characters and settings because those are necessarily scattered throughout a book, rather than conveniently in one spot. With subsequent books, I've been asked to suggest one or more scenes that might work for the cover—a rare privilege. However, I think it's also proof of how an author's words and artist's interpretation can work to the same goals: attracting, informing, and gripping readers. We've grown to work as a team.



A Little Issue of Height

Before you come away thinking that Royo does the ideal painting in one pass, there's more to it than that. Multiple color sketches cross the Atlantic Ocean in various forms. He's working from what the editor supplies, after all, which for my work means a translation of the scene and all of my descriptions into Spanish. The sketches are followed by modifications, then the final piece is approved. And yes, the final piece isn't always what the author envisioned.

Royo's final version of Esen (my Webshifter protagonist) as a Ket was of someone tall and svelte. I'd expected short and lumpy. I wasn't asked to make any change to my written description, but by now I considered the outside and inside of my books to be a whole. So I gave it some thought. Why had I made Esen short? To make her seem harmless while causing her trouble with human-sized furniture. Curious, I rewrote a scene with Esen far too tall for a chair and found the change made it even funnier. Esen grew to her new height that day. Luis and I had collaborated to produce a more original and interesting character.

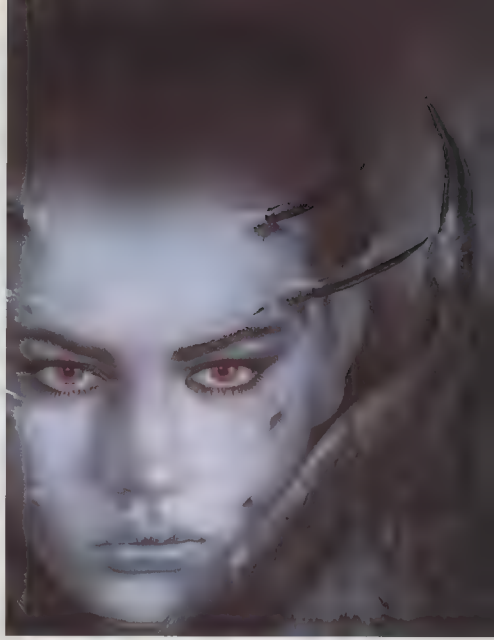
About Luis Royo

Luis Royo was born in Ojalla, Teruel (Spain) in 1954. He studied technical drawing, painting, decoration, and interior design at the Industrial Master School and the Applied Arts School in Zaragoza. He worked in several interior design studios between 1970 and 1979. At the same time, he painted, and his work was ultimately exhibited in cities across Spain. By the 1980s, Royo was working in comics as well, being published around the world in magazines such as *Heavy Metal* and *Comix International*. In 1983, he turned to illustration with NORMA Editorial, and quickly established himself as a master in the field of fantasy art. For further information, please visit Royo's Web site, www.luisroyo.com, contact Alan Lynch Artists, alartists@aol.com, or NORMA Editorial.

Care for Change and Detail

To me, *Ties of Power* was a test to see if Royo could reflect the changes in my character from the first book. He came through wonderfully. As you can see, Royo not only caught Sira's new look, but much more: the little aliens, the flower petals, even the presence of solitary, yellow plumed Copelup, a pivotal character.

Flower petals and individual aliens are typical of Royo's attention to detail. It's not only with my books, of course. When I asked the author of *Prince of Dreams*, whose cover



ABOVE Evolution *(2001) is the cover art and title for Royo's recent collection, highlighting various aspects and changes in his work. He is not an artist content to stay in one style or with one subject. Instead, as you can see here, he constantly experiments with his own vision*

ABOVE LEFT Fallen Angel *(1997) is my second favorite image from Royo's book,* III Millennium. *He blends pain with compassion, the manufactured with the surreal, beneath what at first appears a simple revisiting of beauty and beast*

LEFT By the final book in the trilogy, To Trade the Stars *(2002), Sira had found her place in human society. Royo's portrayal shows her new confidence and power*

Royo recently completed, about that art, Curt Benjamin noted "The thing I like about the painting most is the elaborate work on the clothing and saddle They give the characters a feel of the exotic I promise I try to fulfill in the story " As authors, it's very reassuring to know that if we put in the words, Royo listens

A Passion for Humanity

In the work Royo creates from his own internal visions, you can see his passion for humanity His women, in particular, are stunning, erotic, and unforgettable If ever an artist could do justice to a cover with a buxom lass in a spacesuit—closed, of course—he could Not that I'm asking for one anytime soon, you understand, but I d trust Royo

To Trade the Stars

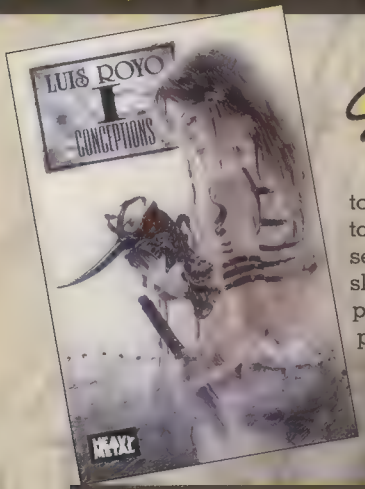
Another image Our latest collaboration These days, Luis and I have a pattern to our work together I send DAW my scenes and descriptions He produces and finalizes the image in consultation with Sheila, who has a fine eye and understanding of my work Then I receive the final image and mine it as I revise Literally, I dig into everything he's painted, looking for what he has seen that I did not The red flash on Sira's shoulder, the long headed aliens to the left, even the stores on upper levels in this illustration earned their place in my story after Luis imagined them It gives me tremendous satisfaction to do this, my words .. to his art . to my words again I hope readers enjoy the result.

As I look back, which this article has let me do, I realize that Luis Royo has done more for me than help sell my books. He has made me conscious of the potential of my imagery I take more care, now, to think of detail and atmosphere Because scenes of important transitions for the characters make the best covers, I'm struck by those scenes more than ever And I've gained something I hadn't anticipated at all: the delightful awareness that what I write, my words, can inspire another's imagination

I owe a considerable part of my success as a writer to Royo and the covers he has created for my books. They capture the eye, enrich the story, and have an indefinable air of class that sets my books apart on the shelf And, I freely confess, each new piece of art still makes me cry To Luis, *un beso*

TOP Fallen Angel IV *(1998) is another from* III Millennium *Royo evokes the feel of high fantasy without relying on forests or castles. Instead, textures and light draw this world for us. BOTTOM Author Benjamin loved how Royo put expression on the stone dragon's face and how its eyes are clearly fixed on the protagonist for his newest book,* Prince of Dreams *(2002)*

LUIS ROYO



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By Eric T. Baker

Traditional roleplaying meets modern technology in *Children of the Sun.*

Children of the Sun. A Dieselpunk Fantasy Roleplaying Game, by Misguided Games, is roleplaying in the world of Raevich. The background material in this basic book concentrates on the Kingdom of Krace. Krace led the war against the elven island of Lysinal and is now the premier realm of Raevich.

Raevich is a place of both science and magic. Wizards study both. The difference between the two is that magic produces useful effects only for people who are born talented. Science works for everyone. Thus *CotS* is a game where characters with rifles can hunt demons on motorcycles, where characters can track monsters clairvoyantly while keeping in touch with each other over radio, and it is a game where the characters can ride airships while engaging in palace intrigues among eight different races.

Player characters can be any of the eight races. The Avendera are leonine, ancient, and pathologically truthful. The Banfildh are two-foot-tall plant people that live to serve Singers (forest spirits) but occasionally go wandering about. Hu'Kra are uncouth barbarians in the Viking sense of the word. The Luparathi are lupine barbarians in the feral, orcish tradition. The Thorqua are shelled reptiles that are less interested in arts and letters than they are in nurturing and husbandry. The Zheol-Jhe are aquatic, a warrior race eternally fighting the powers of darkness that lurk beneath the waves. The last two races are the Humans and Elves. Elves are as they appear in most games, long lived, beautiful, smart, but in *CotS* they are a persecuted minority because their greatest realm, Lysinal, tried to conquer the world (with the aid of black magic) and failed. All Elves are now blamed for the deeds of the Lysinalites.

In the game, characters are measured by nine primary statistics—three for the body, three for the mind, and three for social interactions. Each statistic is expressed as a number of certain-sided dice. Thus a character might have two six-sided dice in Agility and one eight sided die in Charm. To accomplish things, players roll the character's appropriate statistic and add the points for the proper skill, if the character has it. The roll is then modified for various conditions and compared to a target number. The number of levels a character has in a skill governs how great a success he or she will have when the roll wins. The character with the higher skill level learns more from a success than does a character with a lower skill level who rolls higher.

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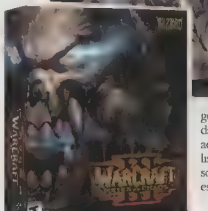
A big advantage the players' characters have right from the start is that they are talented members of their respective races Being talented means they can learn magic and that they can call on magic points to boost their abilities, particularly in times of stress. During combat, characters' magic points are refreshed at the start of each round, so there is no use in holding them back. Talented characters will be casting and boosting on every turn

Speaking of combat, the most important part of it is the Token System. Every character and every nonplayer character (NPC) gets one token which, like magic points, refreshes at the beginning of every round. The players spend tokens to let their characters do what they want to do when they want to do it

In *CotS*, players roll dice to establish the order in which they will act each turn, but tokens allow the order to be changed in special ways Tokens are not needed for actions that would occur normally, such as dodging an attack by a character acting first. Tokens are played when characters want to do something that would completely preempt another character's action such as hiding before they are even seen, or casting a spell on a comrade before they are knocked from a window. Every character has a token, but the token cannot be played to thwart the effects of a token played on that character. Characters can, however, play their token to thwart the effect of a token played on a different character Characters playing tokens to come to one another's aid can go on as long as there are tokens to play and players have legal ideas for actions. The mechanic allows players to overcome bad die rolling with creative thinking



The important first step in getting players involved in *CotS* is to make the point that Raevich is a traditional fantasy setting but that it contains some modern elements With time, players will learn the place names and history of the civilizations, but to start all they need to understand is that everyone got together to beat the elves a couple of decades back Now the nations and races are struggling to live peacefully with each other While the players are learning their way around, the characters get to ride airships, solve dark mysteries, and take advantage of a long spell list. It is fun of a traditional sort with some very interesting twists

Warcraft III from Blizzard Entertainment is the latest installment of the best-selling real-time strategy game (RTS) Normally RTS means building an army of something (in this case, humans, orcs, elves, or undead) and attempting to crush the enemy The crushing is the strategy part. What is meant by real time is that there is no pause button. The player issues orders to each unit on the fly. If there are two (or more) things that need doing at the same time, the player has to prioritize and do them in the most appropriate order

What this version of *Warcraft* has added are several role-playing elements. The most prominent element is the addition of heroes. These are special units who have roles in the story, played out in cut scenes, that link all the levels together. Heroes gain special abilities as they increase in level. They can also pick up and employ the magic items that are hidden around the map. They are often the element of decision, but sometimes are merely really effective support troops

Each level has a main mission that must be completed. There are also subquests around each map. Between the subquests and improving the hero, it is almost possible to forget to build up the base that is needed to create the army required to crush the enemy. Also, the game forces players to try each level on at least Normal difficulty If they fail, then they have the option to play it again on Easy difficulty

A typical level in *WCIII* is the one where the player takes command of a village and must hold it against assault for half an hour until reinforcements arrive On some levels, players get all the time they want to build their forces, arrange their troops, and explore the map. On those levels it is fun building armies of 16 riflemen and sending them about the map, leap-frogging them with a second army of 16 footmen. On other levels, the enemy comes fast and hard and often

As the game gets frantic, players can get an edge by learning the quick navigation keys. Hitting the spacebar jumps the screen to the last person to talk. Players can also assign groups of units a quick select key Hitting this key twice in a row jumps the screen to wherever they are Keeping a quick selected unit in the base is a fast way to get the screen back there

The interface of the game has its ups and downs. Idle workers appear in a small box on the screen and players can just click on that box to jump to them and give them orders There is no such mechanic for troops If a footman wanders away from the main group, there is no way to find him except by scrolling around the map Double-clicking on a trooper auto-selects all the troops of his type .. on the screen. If the foot soldiers a player needs are back at the barracks, the player has to scroll to find them, hoping the troops are visible amid the peasants, buildings, and trees. Players can only put units into the production queue that they have the resources currently on hand to build. Units can't be placed in the queue to be automatically built as soon as the needed gold comes in

The computer is overall very good at running both its own units and the players', but it has some annoyances. The computer sends units to attack based on how close the unit is to the enemy, not based on if other troops in its unit are fighting. Thus, it can easily occur that half a unit is fighting while the other half just stands and watches them die. The com-

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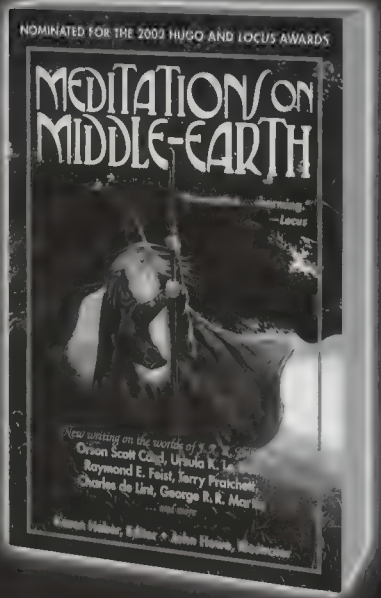
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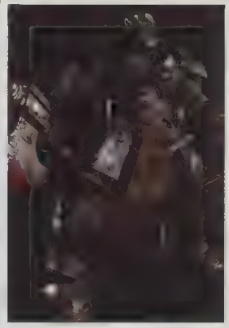

puter does tend to put wizards, riflemen, and artillery in the back of the units, behind the footmen, but it also has the enemy units target the wizards and artillery more often than the footmen. The upshot is that wizards always seem to die first in combat.

The small 3-D units are very good looking, and the rest of the game is even better looking. It is terrific the way the trees shake as the peasants chop them down. The buildings in the camp are nicely animated. The colors are very rich. *WCIII* is not one of the dark games where the color palette is 30 shades of brown and gray. The cut scene movies are better than anything Blizzard has done before, even in *Diablo II*. The in-mission cut scenes use the game engine and keep players immersed in the game. It is even possible to zoom in and out to better watch the action.

As an added bonus, the designers had some fun with the credits. They used the game engine to program a lot of silly stuff in the same way that Pixar includes out takes at the ends of their movies. There are scenes of the computer characters messing up their lines. There is a mini-movie of the lead human hero live in concert, and a football game starring the orcs versus the undead. Very funny stuff. There are even tossed-in lines from movies, like the dwarf saying, "This one time, at scourge camp . . ."

One thing that may bug some players of *WCIII* is that the story the game tells is apocalyptic. This means that the player seldom gets to prevent tragedy. Mostly the game is played to avenge crimes and atrocities. For instance, a female towny is standing on a corner. The instant a player's unit approaches her, a goblin leaps out and kills her. The unit can't approach from a different direction, the player can't target the goblin before it moves. Nothing. The woman is just dead, and an awful lot of virtual people die the same way, without the player being given a chance to save them.

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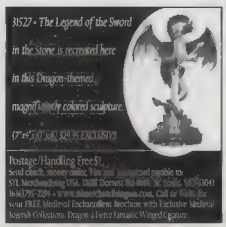
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Basically, *Warcraft III* is one of the best RTS games ever done. People who don't like RTS will not be converted to liking the genre by this game. Those who do like RTS will find it is worth every penny.

New from Sega for the PlayStation2 is *Shinobi*, the classic 2-D ninja game brought to 3-D life. The setting is modern-day Tokyo and the hero is Hotsuma, a super ninja who is the last of his clan. In fact, his clan have all been murdered and brought back as zombie ninja who Hotsuma must defeat on his way to his showdown with the master villain, who is waiting for him in a Japanese castle that has magically appeared in downtown Tokyo. It is an over-the-top backstory, but ninjas are an over-the-top genre. It is great to see the game embrace those elements.

Another such element is the scarf that Hotsuma wears. It started out as a joke with the animators, but once they started playing with it, they decided they liked it. The scarf trails behind Hotsuma for feet, showing off where he's been and helping keep track of him on the screen.

Hotsuma has several weapons at his disposal. He can throw shunken, he can kick, he can employ ninja magic, but mostly what he does is swing his sword, usually in deadly combo attacks. These are all good looking, but somewhat everyday. More outlandishly, Hotsuma can climb and actually run on walls. He can make impossibly high jumps, and while still in the air, jump again. He can move so fast that he leaves an image of where he was behind him. True to the genre, his opponents are left swinging at the image, opening them up for Hotsuma's attacks.

The coolest over-the-top genre element is the timed kill. If players can make four kills in a row in a fixed time, then they are rewarded with a special small cut scene. In the scene recent action freezes. Hotsuma

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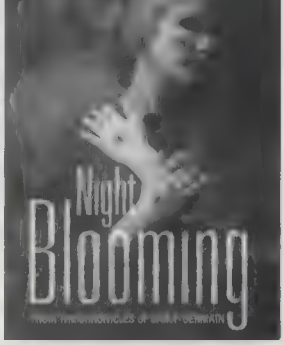

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strikes a pose, and then as he slides his sword back into its sheath the enemies he's just done in fall apart in bloody pieces. Like the slow-motion deaths in Max Payne, this bit of eye candy just never gets old.

The only part of the game that seems out of genre is that the same curse that killed Hotsuma's ancestors infected various inanimate things with evil spirits. This is the rationale for Hotsuma having to fight tanks, helicopters and other modern machines. Being demonic, the machines bleed when cut but, disturbingly as that is, the game is at its best when Hotsuma is fighting ninja and more organic magical monsters. Overall though, the game is fast, deadly and, for a bit, fun.

The Book of Challenges for *Dungeons & Dragons* from Wizards of the Coast is their version of the long-running series of books. *Grimtooth's Traps BoC* spends three pages explaining the book, and has 29 boxes containing either advice to the Dungeon Master (DM) or special rules for play. The other 125 pages are devoted to tricks and traps for DMs to inflict on their players.

The traps are rated by encounter level so the DMs can judge which traps are fair to inflict on their players. This is the main difference between these encounters and the ones in *Grimtooth*. Players were not really meant to overcome *Grimtooth's* traps. They were mainly intended for the amusement of the reader, and the discomfort of the players if they were ever actually used. The players are meant to face and overcome *BoC* traps. The book provides a list of 10 magic spells that all parties should have access to. If they do, then all the traps in the book can be overcome, if the players face them intelligently.

Dramatis Personae: Campaign Ready NPCs for the d20 System is from Archangel Studios, the people who create the Image published comic book *The Red Star*. Thus, it contains some great art. It also contains 28 NPCs ready to be introduced into any d20 fantasy role-playing campaign. There are both heroes and villains contained in the book, but no tavern keepers or bargemen. All the characters are active people, ready to engage the players' characters in dialogue or combat.

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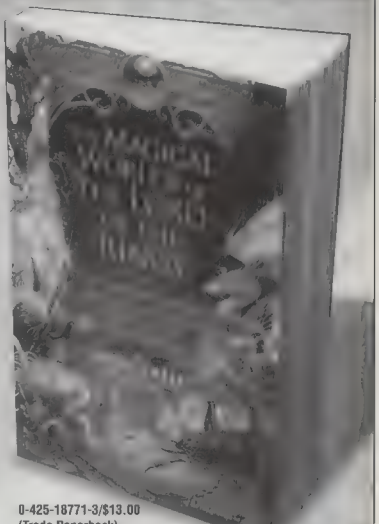

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barrow fire

Continued from page 71

Nearby, I see three other huts. Between them is a low stockade. I can see three or four goats huddled together, breathing clouds of hot breath into the air. I smell smoke and goat dung and something else I'd rather not think about.

The door of one of the huts pulls open, and a man steps out, then pauses and looks around. He is dressed in a heavy, hooded fur cloak. I guess he is about five-feet-four, but heavily built. He has a long, black beard and long, straggly hair. I can't see his eyes.

He grunts, then turns and walks from the huts by a path that leads up the hill. I follow him. He doesn't seem to notice.

The path curves around the side of the hill as it goes up, passing through a stand of trees. I think I can identify oak and lime, and maybe hawthorn.

Something howls. My mind says wolf, but how can it be? Wolves have been extinct in Britain for hundreds of years.

I emerge from the trees. The man is 50 yards ahead of me, but I see him clearly. He is near the brow of the hill. There is a barrow there, a dark silhouette against the moonlight.

The man reaches the barrow and circles it. Then he climbs to the top and peers around. His shoulders slump. He descends and sits before the barrow, crouched over. Within minutes a small fire springs up. His face is made gaunt by its flickering light.

I think that maybe he can't see me. I can't be here, so he can't see me. I start up the trail again.

The stones are hard and cold beneath my feet. My joints ache.

I reach the barrow, and the sitting man. He is staring into his fire. I step past him.

"He is gone," the man says. I jump, then turn to him. He has a deep, accented voice. If he is Neolithic, as he seems to be, he can't be speaking English, but that is how I hear it.

"Who?" I ask, softly. Maybe he isn't talking to me. Am I here, or is this a dream? If so, whose? Mine or his?

"The boy. My son. He is gone. I fear he is dead." He looks up at me. "The boy has no fear."

Sadness rolls over me so suddenly that I have to close my eyes and clamp my jaw. He is dead, I want to say. Nine years old, I want to say, and hit by a car. It didn't even stop.

"Can a boy survive seven days out here?" the man asks. "I have searched everywhere. I cannot find him." His eyes are staring straight into mine when I open them. They are a deeper blue than I have ever seen. His voice turns soft, so that I have to strain to listen. "He had only three scars. Now he is gone. I cannot find him. I cannot bury his ashes. He cannot travel to the *tchetchla*." I don't recognize the word. "Help me," he says.

I stand. On the other side of the hill, I see a wooded valley. It looks very familiar. If it had no trees, and a small stream, and a road, and a couple of trailers ...

I leave the man behind and descend into the valley. It is hard to place myself, but I think that there is where Bennett's trailer would be, there in the trees.

A film of ice splinters beneath my feet. The ground sinks, and dark water wells up. Not far away are the tracks of a large animal. Something bigger than me, with claws.

And there, just ahead, where the mud is deep and only a couple of dead, white tree trunks stretch from the water, there is where the trench will be. I feel sick.

"You look bloody awful," Marcy said.

My head hurt. I was sure a migraine was coming on. "Bad night."

"We're going to try the capstone again, tomorrow," Frank said, looking pleased with himself. "We're going for larger rollers."

"Round huts," I croaked.

"What?"

"I think we should have round huts, like Marcy said, and steeper roofs."

"Traitor," Frank whispered to me, then glared at the smirking Marcy. "Go suck on your trowel."

"What's on the agenda today?" I asked. Pulses of pain were making my vision swim.

"You're going home," Marcy said. "Me and Frank have been talking. We're going to gang up on Bennett and make him give you a day or two off, and we're making an appointment for you to talk to your doctor."

"Don't ." I said, then took a breath and started again. "Don't tell me what to do." Pain thudded through my head and I grabbed at my eyes instinctively. "I'm coping," I whispered.

Frank and Marcy exchanged glances.

"No," Marcy said. "You're not." She had her fists on her hips, and her lips had turned white. "I've been watching you this past week. If you go on, you're going to have a breakdown. You're going to talk to someone, if we have to drag you there by brute force. I'm not joking."

I looked her in the eyes, through the pain. No, she wasn't joking. Something crumpled in me. I nodded carefully. "OK," I said. "I'll talk to someone." And I would.

I parked the car beside Bennett's trailer. The luminous hands of the clock showed 3:15. It was a clear night, with a thin layer of mist floating just above the valley floor. I pulled on my big coat and my gloves, and let myself out.

My nose ran immediately, and my eyes streamed. I wiped them with the back of my glove. I wished I'd worn another pair of socks and brought a hat. Too late to go back for them. Tomorrow was the anniversary of David's death.

I slipped my key into the lock of the second trailer, the one me and Marcy and Frank shared. It was slightly warmer there. I turned on the light. The desktops and surfaces were covered in drawings, photocopied articles, and bits of pottery and stone, the normal mess.

I went straight to the drawers at the far end of the trailer, and pulled open the top one. The bones were there, where I had seen Frank put them, sealed in clear plastic bags. The sight of them made me tremble. I forced myself to calm. I clenched my fists until my hands stopped shaking.

Bennett would fire us for this, I had no doubt. It would be the end of my career, and God knows what would happen to Frank and Marcy and the department.

I took a deep breath. I had no choice. These were the boy's bones. I was sure, the poor, lost Neolithic boy's. "I'm sorry," I muttered under my breath. What a way to repay Frank and Marcy.

I carefully emptied the bags one by one into my canvas rucksack. I heard the bones clatter together brittlely. Bile rose in my throat. I swallowed.

I turned off the light and locked the trailer behind me.

I started along the track, up the hill.

He is waiting for me outside the barrow. A small fire is burning fiercely. Wolves howl out on the moor. I see trees in the valley, and on the other side of the hill, the dark shapes of the settlement huts, smoke still rising from one. I smell the goats even from here, a rich, cloying smell.

I hug my coat tight around me.

The fire is hot as I seat myself beside him.

"The boy is dead," the man says.

"Yes," I say, through tears. I see tears on the Neolithic man's own cheeks. "I loved him," I say, and when the man nods, I know he knows I am talking about David. "I miss him." I think it's the first time I've been able to say this.

I pass the rucksack to him. He fumbles with the buckles, then opens them. Slowly he pulls out the dry bones, one by one, and places them on the fire. They catch quickly and burn brightly.

"I loved my boy, too," he says. "Here I set him free."

Finally he removes the skull, kisses it, and hands it to me.

"Here I set him free," I say, choking on the words. *David*, I think. *Good-bye.*

I kiss the skull too, then place it on the fire.

We sit before a fire of bones, as the morning pales the sky. When the bones are entirely burned, he scoops the still-hot ashes into a clay pot and hands it to me. I place it in my rucksack.

In the morning I will place the pot inside the barrow, before the capstone is finally levered on. The boy will travel to the *tchetchla*. ❧

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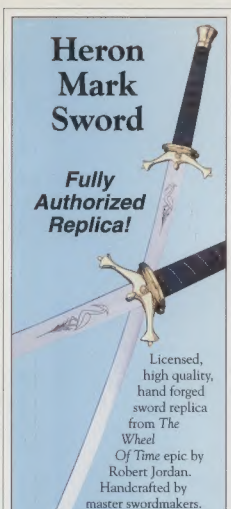

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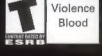

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